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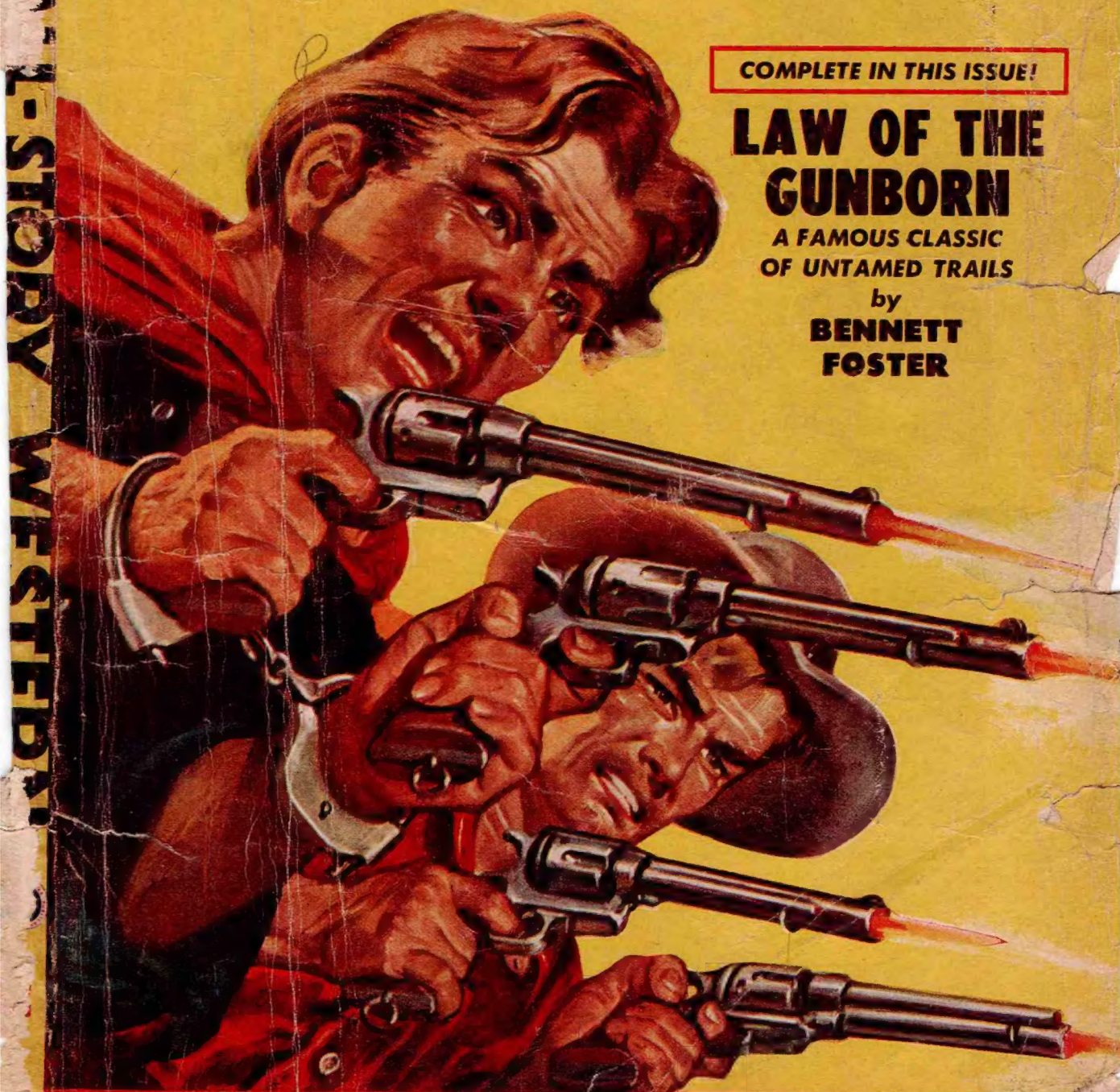
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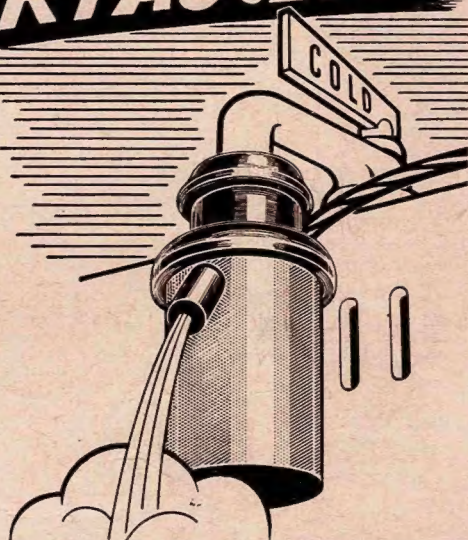
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VOL. 1

APRIL, 1949

NO. 2



BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

LAW OF THE GUNBORN Bennett Foster 8

There's been plenty of good ridin' on the road to hell, and he'd heeded only one law . . . the law he packed in his holster. Now he knew his feet were pointed towards a six-foot haven, as he listened to one last, dark warning: "This trail's long enough to wear the shine off a lawstar—dark enough to hide a hundred guns. If you ride it fast enough, mister, you'll beat a bullet, but not the Law Of The Gunborn!"

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SHORT STORY

HELL RIM RANGE Harry Van Demark 121

More dead than alive, they thundered where the devil himself feared to ride—and no man ever came back!

A DEPARTMENT

THE HOME CORRAL The Editors 6

A new stamping ground for us corral cronies—draw up to the campfire, pardners, and shake hands with Potato Creek Johnnie.

Next Issue Out May 4th!

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The Home Corral

By
K. V. Bailey

“POTATO CREEK” Johnnie Perrett, who got his monicker from the gold he panned in Potato Creek in the Black Hills, was only a kid when Deadwood was really wild. All down the years from the days of Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane, Johnnie saw them come and go.

He not only palled around with Hickok and Calamity Jane, who was fond of children, but he knew “Stuttering” Brown, the gamest stage-line superintendent who ever wore a six-gun, and bandit Sam Bass, who turned to crime in the Black Hills.

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It was the Fourth of July—always a big day in Deadwood—and before the Fourth was over Deadwood saw more excitement than it had seen in many a year. And Potato Creek Johnnie was in it up to his neck.

On the evening of July 3rd the Combination Theater—which included a saloon and gambling hall—was crowded. The boys from the mines were whooping it up. Over in one corner the famous Poker Alice was presiding over a poker game, her ever-present cigar set at a rakish angle. A smoothly-dressed hombre with handle-bar mustache was behind the faro layout. The wheel was spinning and Twenty-one was being dealt.

Elbow-crookers were ten deep at the bar, which ran all the way down one side of the big room. The tables, set around two sides of the dance floor, were full to the last chair. Waiters scurried about with drinks. In the boxes around the balcony bewhiskered gold miners, in from the

(Continued on Page 126)

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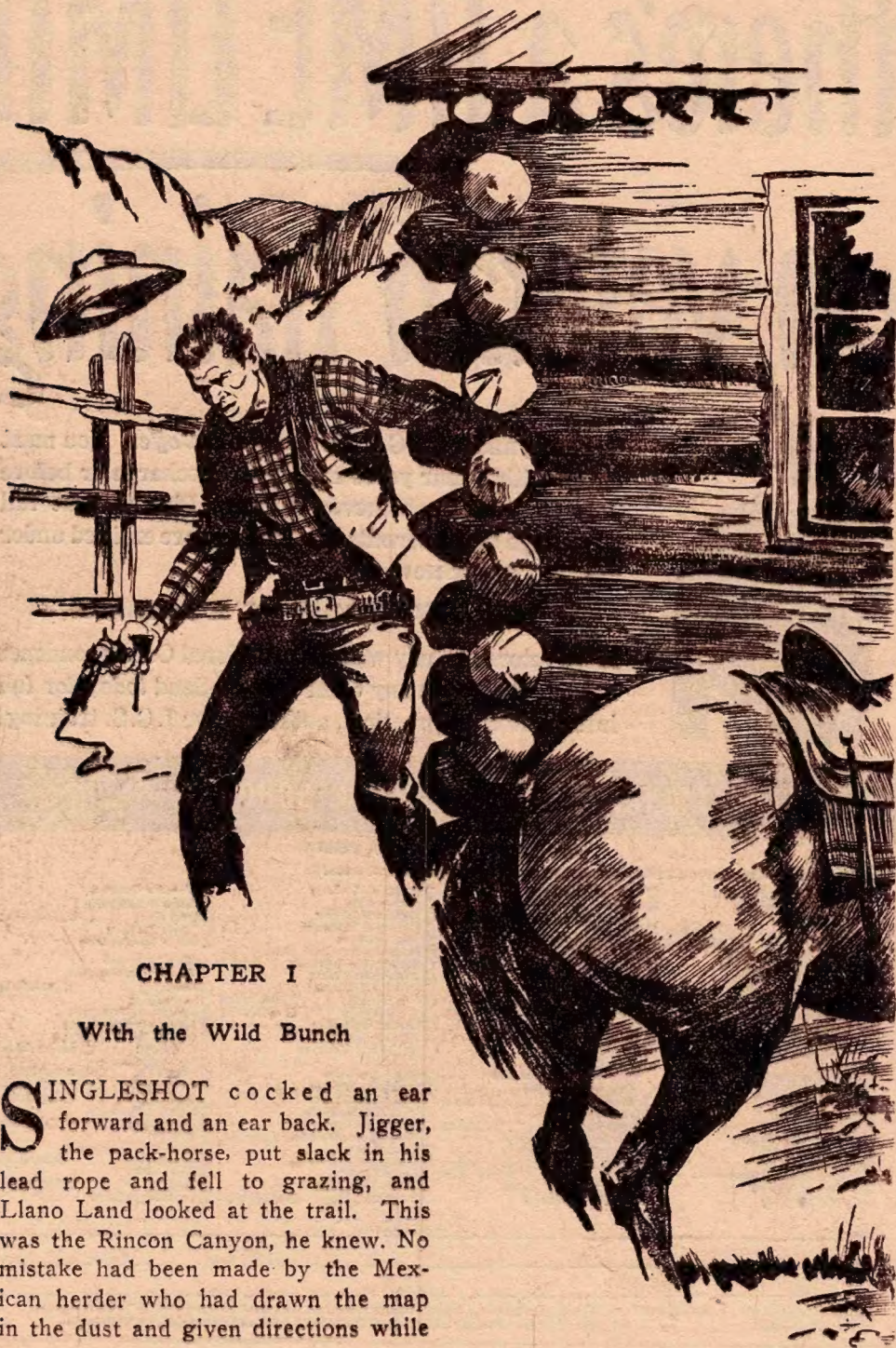
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By Bennett Foster



CHAPTER I

With the Wild Bunch

SINGLESHOT cocked an ear forward and an ear back. Jigger, the pack-horse, put slack in his lead rope and fell to grazing, and Llano Land looked at the trail. This was the Rincon Canyon, he knew. No mistake had been made by the Mexican herder who had drawn the map in the dust and given directions while

*This trail's long enough to wear the shine off a lawstar
—dark enough to hide a hundred guns. If you ride it
fast enough, mister, you'll beat a bullet, but not the—*

LAW OF THE GUNBORN



The gun in Llano's hand kicked
back sharply, and the man toppled
forward. . . .

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the sheep blatted and the dogs stood by with lolling tongues. Nor had Llano made a mistake in following these directions.

Still there was something wrong. Where the trail entered this little mountain park it had been well defined and heavy. Now while still well defined, it seemed to Llano that the travel was lighter. Somewhere behind him, men had left the trail, branching out.

Llano reined Singleshot around sharply.

Back in the little park, with aspen rustling to his left, he kept his eyes on the ground. There was no branching trail, no mark of travel; still Land kept his eyes fixed on the earth, searching.

"Throwing off on us, Singleshot," said Llano. "Some place . . ."

He left the sentence unfinished and swung Singleshot to the left. Among the aspens there were scattered marks of shod hoofs. A horse, crossing a log, had clipped the bark with an iron-shod toe. Llano nodded to himself and rode on.

Beyond the trees the hoofmarks collected again. Again the trail was beneath Singleshot's feet. The big horse followed it and Llano smiled to himself. Experience had found this trail.

The smile changed into a frown as he recalled the experience . . .

Singleshot climbed a rise, protestingly, while Jigger pulled back on the lead rope. Before Llano was a little pocket, a cul-de-sac in the hills. This was the Rincon, the thing that gave the canyon its name. There were more aspen, pines interspersed among them, then rock, and then a little cleared park in the rincon. There was a pole fence thrown across the narrow end of the park and behind the fence

stood a cabin, smoke rising lazily from its chimney.

At Llano Land's left a hidden voice spoke coldly, "Hold it!"

Singleshot stopped—Land froze in the saddle. From the cabin a man, a rifle across his arm, emerged and came forward toward the fence.

At the fence he halted, peering at Land.

Land, motionless, said, "Hello, Mat," and waited.

The man at the fence continued his scrutiny for a long minute. Then he let his rifle slide down from his arm until its butt rested on the ground, and returned the greeting. "Hello, Llano."

Land relaxed and Mat McCarthy, at the fence, said, "It's all right, Shorty." Land heard the click of a hammer lowered.

Singleshot moved ahead toward the fence.

Mat McCarthy had changed since Land had last seen him. Land remembered a lithe, supple boy who could ride the rough string with any outfit at which he happened to work. Now Mat was heavy, with a belly that threatened momentarily to overflow his belt. Still his eyes were the same, eager and bright and Irish blue, albeit his jaw sagged in proportion to his belly. Mat McCarthy! Ten years since he had last seen Mat . . . And they had gone different ways, these two, since they had left the old Anchor outfit on the Stake Plains. Llano Land and Mat McCarthy, McCarthy taking the wild trail and Land the trail that paralleled it. Manhunter, Llano Land. Hunted man, Mat McCarthy.

"You better light, Llano," said Mat McCarthy. "Long time we don't see each other."

Llano swung down from Singleshoot. "Shorty'll look after yore horses," McCarthy said cordially. "You'll stay the night, of course."

Land nodded. He would stay the night, he knew. McCarthy's cordiality was tight, tense with a little false ring in it. Llano Land knew why that ring was there. He grinned thinly. "You still make sourdough biscuits?" he asked, falling into step with McCarthy.

"Still make 'em," returned McCarthy. "We might have a mess of them for supper."

THE two entered the cabin, McCarthy standing back and making way for Land. There were bunks in the cabin, Land estimated. Bunks and a stove and a table. The cabin was none too clean.

Land walked over and sat down on a bunk.

"So here you are," said Mat McCarthy. "I been kind of expectin' you, Llano."

Llano Land shook his head. "Not me," he answered. "You've been expecting somebody, but it was not me."

"Well, mebbe not you exactly," drawled McCarthy.

Land felt for papers and tobacco. The cigarette formed in his fingers and he looked over it at McCarthy. "It's cattle with you, isn't it, Mat?" he drawled. "Leastwise I never heard of you dealing in either horses or money."

McCarthy's blue eyes were narrow, slitted things. "I speculate in cattle some," he said, consideration in his voice. "Why, Llano?"

Land lit his smoke, let twin streamers trickle from his nostrils. "Because," he said, "I'm looking for horses. For horses and for Jack Ames."

McCarthy let that sink in. His voice was still cautious when he spoke. "Ames been foolin' with horses?" he asked.

Land nodded. "Raising them," he explained. "Not . . . speculating in 'em."

"Oh," said McCarthy, and now his eyes were wide once more and there was no restraint visible in his jovial smile.

Land nodded. "Jack left the Anchor two years after you and I quit," he said. "His mother is living at Carpenter. I just came in from there."

McCarthy stirred on the bunk. "Yes?" he encouraged.

"Jack's been missing." Land considered his cigarette. "You see, Mat—" he threw off his habitual restraint—"I hit it, finally. I staked a man in Cripple Creek. We made it."

McCarthy started up from the bunk, "That's—" he began.

Land stifled the congratulations. "We didn't make much," he said. "My share was fifteen thousand. I thought it was enough. I quit and was going to buy a little outfit. Then I found Mrs. Ames in Carpenter."

There was silence for a moment and Land drawled meditatively, "Remember the meals she used to cook for us?"

McCarthy nodded. His blue eyes were looking back through the years. "She used to patch my clothes for me," he said, remembering, "an' darn my socks."

"An' Jack . . ." Land let it drop there.

"Jack would give a man the shirt off his back," said McCarthy gruffly. "Well, Llano?"

"Well . . ." Land took his time, "Jack had started over to the Ladrone with seven head of horses, thoroughbreds of his own raising. That was a

month ago and he hasn't been back or written."

McCarthy's cheeks creased as his jaws set firm. "Mother Ames know who he sold 'em to?" he asked.

Llano Land shook his head. "No," he answered. "She didn't know."

"An' yo're lookin' for Jack?" McCarthy let his voice trail off.

"For Jack an' the horses."

"You might find the horses," said McCarthy after a moment.

"I thought of that, too," said Land, quietly, "but I didn't tell Mother Ames."

Both men were silent. They knew Jack Ames. There was one thing only that could keep Jack Ames silent for a month.

"Look," said McCarthy heavily, "when you came ridin' in here I thought mebbe you'd been hired. You see," he hesitated, "we kind of deal in cattle here. There's a good market for fat Colorado cattle in Texas, an' some time we can turn a Texas steer to advantage in Colorado. I thought mebbe . . . I knowed that you'd been workin' for stock associations an' peace officerin' an' such. Well, you got a reputation, Llano."

"I'm looking for Jack Ames," said Llano quietly.

McCarthy considered. "Well now," he said at length, "I got some connections, Llano. I'll make inquiries around. If the boys know that yo're all through there ain't a reason why they wouldn't help you that I can think of."

"I'm through," said Land, heavily. "Except for this one job, I'm done. My God, Mat! Do you think I liked it?"

McCarthy pursed his lips. "You followed it a long time," he said.

"Can you stop a thing you've started?" demanded Land hotly.

"Would you be here today if you could stop?"

The sudden flare of temper surprised McCarthy. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Land again. "No," he admitted, "mebbe not, Llano. Mebbe you an' me could of taken different roads after we left the Anchor."

The cabin door opened abruptly and three men came in. One was short and had curly hair, evidently the "Shorty" to whom McCarthy had spoken, the man who had stopped Llano on the trail. The other two were big, blond men, surprisingly alike in appearance. Llano knew them by reputation. They were the Savoy twins.

Llano found himself sizing up the three, noting how they stood, how they wore their weapons, little facts about them. He was annoyed. That was a habit that he would have to break . . . McCarthy made introductions.

"This is Shorty Hamarick, Llano," he said, "an' them two with him are Arch an' Virge Savoy. I don't know which is which an' I reckon it don't make no difference. This is Llano Land, boys. You heard of him." McCarthy's eyes wrinkled at the corners and a broad smile, widened his lips. "Just to make it easier," he concluded, "I reckon I better say that Llano's quit business. He's over here on a private matter."

Hamarick's shoulders slumped and the two big twins walked over to a bunk and sat down, side by side. "There's another boy that stays here," said McCarthy looking at Llano. "He's away on business right now."

Llano nodded. He wondered what Colorado or Texas herd might be under observation at the moment.

"There's steak for supper," said Hamarick, his voice friendly. "I



Llano's horse was in full stride, circling to parallel the runaway's course. . . .

reckon I'll get at the cookin'." Briskly he rolled up his sleeves and took a flour sack from the wall. Llano got up.

"I'll walk out an' look after my horses," he said. "That Slingshot horse is kind of proddy sometimes."

McCarthy rose to accompany his guest and the two went out.

HAMARICK, briskly tucking a flour sack around his waist, looked at the Savoy twins. One of these lounged lazily on a bunk, the other squatted

against a wall and methodically rolled a cigarette.

"Land?" said Shorty Hamairck.

The Savoy twin on the bunk grunted. "You ain't been in this country long, Shorty," he said. "You don't know Llano Land?"

Hamarick, prodding the fire, shrugged. "He ain't known in Montana," he answered.

"I thought he'd be knowed wherever there was cow-thieves," drawled the Savoy by the wall. "Llano Land. Shucks, Shorty, Llano Land is—Tell him, Arch."

Arch Savoy stirred on the bunk. "Llano Land," he said meditatively, "used to punch cows with Mat down on the Staked Plains. That's where he got his name. Somebody asked him one time what his name was an' he said, 'Just plain Land,' Llano is 'plain' in Mexican, an' he's been Llano ever since."

"An' what does that make him?" asked Shorty, putting a steak into his hot pan.

"That," replied Arch Savoy, "don't make him nothin'. But the things that happened to him made him. He had a brother in the Rangers. Some fellow shot his brother an' got away. Llano followed that man for two years an' killed him up in the Indian Territory. Walked in where this man was with a bunch of his friends an' took him right there. Gave him his chance an' beat him to it."

"An' then?"

"An' then he got to peace officerin' an' such," drawled Arch Savoy. "He held down Tascosa for a year when Tascosa was tough. He worked for the stock association in Texas. He worked a season for Wells-Fargo, startin' as a shotgun messenger and windin' up by takin' care of the trouble divisions. When the railroad got into Colorado he went to work for them. He was their troubleshooter until they hired him to be marshal in Central City durin' the silver rush. I don't reckon there's been a day for ten years when Llano Land could lay down an' sleep knowin' that he wasn't in danger, an' I don't reckon there's been a day in them ten years when he wasn't lookin' for somebody."

Impressed, Shorty grunted again. "I thought he looked pretty forked when he came ridin' in here," he said. "You don't reckon he's in here buttin' into our business, do you?"

The Savoy's exchanged a flashing look. "Not Llano Land," said Virgil Savoy. "You heard McCarthy say that Land wasn't on business. That's good enough for me. I've heard of Land an' I know McCarthy. Nope. Land ain't here on our account."

"Well . . ." Shorty Hamarick spoke doubtfully. "You—"

"Go on an' fry the steak, Shorty," drawled Arch Savoy. "Don't worry about Land. If he'd been looking for us you'd of been layin' out in the aspens an' me an' Virge an' Mat would either be runnin' to beat hell, or makin' a fight of it. Land ain't here on business. Not at all."

Hamarick turned to the stove again and Virge Savoy straightened from his squat by the wall. "Speed an' nerve," said Virge Savoy. "Llano Land's got 'em both. He ain't so doggoned big, but he's got what it takes to get along."

Hamarick laughed and spoke above the sound of the frying steak. "Would you speak rampageously for him if he was here on business?" questioned Hamarick. "Would you, Virge?"

"I might hate a man's guts an' still like the looks of his nerve," answered Virge Savoy, "I—"

The door opened. Llano and Mat McCarthy entered the cabin.

[T was a good supper that they ate that night. McCarthy made sour-dough biscuits, at which confection he was a master hand. Hamarick fried potatoes and steak and made coffee and there were stewed dried peaches for dessert.

When the meal was finished and cigarettes had been rolled, Llano spoke again of his mission.

"I'm looking for Jack Ames, boys," said Llano. "He came over here with

a string of horses, and he hasn't been heard from for over a month." With that introduction, he told what he knew concerning Ames, describing the man, and, more important, describing the horses. "There was a red roan in the bunch," said Llano. "A mare. Then there were two bay geldings and a chestnut, a black mare, an' two claybank horses. Jack branded a little JA connected on the left side of the neck, up under the mane, and he put the same thing on the inside of the near flank."

THE men shook their heads. They had, they said, seen nothing of such horses nor had they seen a man that answered Ames's description. "That ain't sayin' we won't see 'em, though," volunteered Hamarick. "We hold cattle in this country sometimes, an' we don't always use the same place. One way an' another we get around. We'll let you know, Land."

"I'd take it kindly," said Llano. "I'm going to Ladron from here. I'll go tomorrow. Maybe you could get word to me there if you run across something." He knew that these men must have connections in the town. How else could they get their supplies?

McCarthy nodded his agreement to Llano's suggestion.

"Ladron's a good place," he said. "We could get word to you there all right, an' I been thinkin', Llano. If Jack was goin' to sell those horses over this way, the Duro Grant people would be the most likely folks to buy. They got some Englishmen down there that sure like a blooded horse. Time or two, me an' the boys been tempted to go into the horse business."

Hamarick laughed at that and the Savoy twins grinned. Llano smiled thinly. He knew just how these men

would go into the horse business.

The Savoy's washed the dishes after the meal and when that chore was done and kindling had been split for the morning fire, the men sat about the little cabin smoking, talking a little, content with their momentary peace and security.

One of the Savoy's pulled a guitar from beneath a bunk, and after tuning it, began to strum. He played a while, then laid the instrument aside. McCarthy reached out a big hand, took the guitar and passed it over to Llano.

"Here," he commanded, "you used to play some Llano. Sing, too. Take a whirl at it."

Llano, a smile on his lips, took the guitar. He checked the tuning, played a few chords, and then with fingers flashing, swept into, 'Hell Among The Yearlings, his foot patting time. A fandango followed the jig, and then gradually the tempo of the music slowed. Llano Land forgot the others in the room. He began to hum, his voice a soft baritone, barely carrying over the tones that came from the strings. First it was *La Noche Blanca Esta*, then *Pena*, and then harking back to the days of the long ago he sang *The Red River Valley*.

As he finished the old song his fingers swept across the strings in a swell of harmony and looked up. The cabin was silent as death itself. Only the echoes from that last chord lingered.

For a moment the silence held, and then Mat McCarthy rose to his feet.

"Damn you, Llano," he said "that takes me—Hell! I don't care if I never steal another cow." He stalked to the door, opened it and walked out. Llano, too, arose and went out of the door, and on a bunk one big Savoy looked at the other.

"A fellow with a reputation like he's got," said Virge Savoy, "an' he can play an' sing like that! Hell, Arch, I think—"

"Damn it," said Arch Savoy, "I think so too. Mebbe we can find this Jack Ames for him. Mebbe."

CHAPTER II

Gwynne Rae

IT was Arch Savoy that cooked breakfast, early next morning. Mat McCarthy's little group of outlaws worked with a smooth precision and lack of friction that might have been envied by other and more honest outfits. Llano thought of that as, leading Jigger, he rode Singleshot out over the trail that Mat McCarthy had shown him.

The morning was fresh and cool. Later in the day it would be hot but now the New Mexico sky was clear and clean and the wind was sweet. Topping the rise of the last ridge, Singleshot stopped of his own accord and Llano looked down at the country below.

There was a canyon below him which widened gradually until it met another larger canyon. The larger canyon was the Ladron. A stream ran through the Ladron canyon, Ladron creek, and there were cottonwoods and willows along the stream. A road crossed the creek and went on down the canyon, now paralleling the water, now crossing it. This, thought Llano, would be the road to Marthastown, the gold camp that rested at the head of Comanche Creek fifty miles west and north.

As though to confirm that thought, four high-wheeled wagons, each drawn by six teams of mules, crawled into view below. The drivers sat

astride the high wheel-mule of each string, controlling their animals by a single long rein that, coupled with a jockey stick, served as a communication with the leaders. As Llano watched, the first wagon rounded a sharp curve, the mules stepping over the chain that connected them with the wagon and pulling hard into their collars.

When the supply wagons had disappeared, Llano bestirred Singleshot and rode on down toward the main canyon. Dropping from the ridge, he lost sight of the stream, the walls of the little canyon he followed rising sharp about him. The trail leveled off and the canyon widened, and Llano rode out into the broad Ladron.

Singleshot made for the stream, intent on water, and Llano let him go. Circling a motte of cottonwood, he reached the creek — and as his horse splashed into the shallows and dropped his head to drink, Llano found himself suddenly with company. Across the stream sitting a big bay horse, was another rider, a still-faced, gray-haired man. For a moment the two looked at each other, their eyes saying nothing. Then the man on the bay horse nodded and smiled faintly. Llano returned that smile.

"Nice mornin'," said the gray-haired man.

"Fine," agreed Llano.

The bay horse, finishing his drinking, lifted his head, and the gray-haired man urged him forward. Splashing, the bay crossed the stream. Singleshot, too, had finished his drink and his lead-colored head with the sharp, black-tipped ears pricked forward, following the progress of the other horse. The gray-haired man halted his mount, waiting courteously. Llano, turning a little, faced him.

"I take it you're travelin'," said

the gray-haired man, looking at the pack on Jigger.

"To Ladron," agreed Llano.

"I'm headed there myself," announced the stranger. "Would you mind my company?"

Somehow, Llano liked the courtesy of the question. Somehow, he liked the man who asked it. "I'd be glad for company," he said.

THE two rode away from the stream side by side. The gray-haired man was tall, tall and thin as Llano was thin, with a trim slimness that bespoke muscles pared down until only usefulness remained. His stirrups were long, longer than Llano's, and his head was above Llano's, although the bay horse and the lead-colored Singleshot were of identical height. The gray-haired man's eyes were a light blue, and there was a trim, gray mustache shading his mouth. That mouth curved pleasantly as its owner smiled, but the eyes, like Llano's gray eyes, were watchful.

"How are things in Marthastown?" asked the gray-haired man.

"Booming, I've heard," answered Llano. This was a cunning question, he thought. The stranger was probing for information.

"They tell me that the new dredge is really doin' the work," agreed the gray-haired man placidly.

Silence followed that statement. Llano lifted his stirrups as Singleshot splashed across a ford in the creek. Jigger, the buckskin, suddenly sullen, pulled back on his lead rope and, mechanically, Llano leaned a little forward as Singleshot pulled.

"Gold," said the gray-haired man whimsically. "Funny what a man will do for gold, ain't it?"

"Sometimes," asserted Llano.

"It's helped Ladron, the gold strike

has," said the gray-haired man. "Ladron is gettin' to be quite a supply point."

"Lots of freighting," Llano Land answered. And then, throwing out a false lead, "Any chance of a man tying up with a freight outfit?"

"That would depend," the other said.

Singleshot tossed his head up sharply. Jigger came up on the rope, no longer pulling back. A red roan horse broke from the tree screen of the creek and running full out, came towards the two riders. On the running horse, a girl on a side-saddle leaned back as she pulled against an iron mouth. The red roan was bolting.

Mechanically, Llano let Jigger's rope free from his saddle horn. He could feel Singleshot bunch under him. Then, apparently without volition from the rider, the big lead-colored horse was in full stride, sweeping forward, circling to come against the roan and parallel the runaway's course. That was how Singleshot came by his name. He looked like a big slug of lead, such as might come from the barrel of a Sharp's buffalo gun, and he traveled like that same leaden slug.

Llano found himself alongside the red roan, found himself leaning forward, his left hand wrapping his reins about his saddle horn. Then his hands went out, settled above those straining hands on the roan's bridle reins, fastened there.

"Shot!" said Llano sharply.

Singleshot broke his great racing stride. His head came up, fighting against the martingale, tossing, throwing back flecks of foam. Llano, hard set in his saddle, applied the pressure.

Gradually the roan's head came up; Gradually the roan broke stride. Gradually they slowed. From full run to

lope, from lope to canter, still tossing his head. Holding the roan's reins, Llano slid from his saddle.

The girl was breathing hard. Her face was flushed from exertion, her cheeks red with the rich color, and her lower lip was caught between small white teeth. Her eyes were blue, big with fear at the moment, and the wind had whipped away her hat and tumbled her hair until it hung, rich and glossy, about her shoulders. The sun caught a tinge of red in her hair, making a glowing nimbus for her face.

Llano stood at the roan mare's head, holding the bridle reins, his right hand reaching up to the mare's neck, almost hidden by the roan's mane.

The girl let go a long breath, caught another and let it go. Almost she was sobbing.

"Easy," said Llano. "It's all right now."

"She bolted," said the girl. "We were crossing the creek and she took fright at something. I couldn't check her."

LLANO looked past the mare. Other riders were converging upon them. From behind came the gray-haired man, leading Jigger. From the creek came two riders, their horses full out and running. One of these rode a flat English saddle. The other was set heavily on his horse, deep in a stock saddle. The two riders slid their horses to a stop and the man in the flat saddle threw himself from his horse and ran to the girl.

"Are you all right, Gwynne?" he panted. "Are you all right, dear?"

Llano could see the same tinge of red in the speaker's hair, the same high color in his cheeks as in the hair and cheeks of the girl. Then his eyes strayed past the speaker and caught the glance of the man in the stock

saddle. Cold black eyes the man had, and his face was smooth olive. Now he dismounted, coming toward the roan horse.

Llano's hand, on the roan's neck, moved softly, stroking the sweating skin, soothing the mare. Suddenly the motion of that hand stopped. Llano's fingers encountered roughness, a scar that lifted the satin of the roan hide. His finger traced the scar.

"I'm all right now, Donald," said the girl on the roan. "This gentleman—" she looked at Llano—"caught Betty and stopped her, but for a minute—"

"The brute should be killed," said the man with the black eyes.

The fair-skinned man turned to Llano. "I am indebted to you," he said courteously. "My sister—"

"Why," said Llano, "I was lucky to be where I was." He had taken his hand from the mare's neck and stood now, holding the reins. Singleshot, his work done, was cropping grass.

"I think," the girl on the horse said impulsively, "that you saved my life."

The fair-haired man was holding out his hand. "I'm Donald Rae," he announced. "I don't know what I can say or do, Mister—?"

"Land," informed Llano. "There's no need to thank me. I'm glad that I could help out."

The dark-skinned man broke in smoothly. "Hadn't you better take Gwynne to the house, Donald?" he asked. "I'm sure that she is upset."

The girl leaned forward again. Her eyes were bright. "If you will come to Ladron House, perhaps I can thank you properly, Mr. Land," she said.

Llano was embarrassed. All this fuss about a runaway horse. "I'm glad I could help out," he repeated awkwardly.

"You must come to Ladron House, Mr. Land." Donald Rae seconded his sister's invitation. "We are indebted to you. We—"

"I'm sure that you can leave the thanks to me, Donald," the dark-skinned man broke in again. "I know that Gwynne needs to get back. She may be hurt. You must take her in."

Donald Rae looked from Llano to the speaker and then back to his sister. His fresh, open face was anxious. "We'll go," he agreed. "Come, Gwynne. We will see you at Ladron House, Mr. Land."

Rae mounted. Riding forward, he took the reins that Llano held up to him. The girl smiled down at Llano. "You will come, won't you? I can't thank you properly now."

Llano bowed slightly and said nothing. Donald Rae turned his horse, pulling on the reins of the red roan mare.

"You've already been thanked enough, Land," he said brusquely. "Here." His hand met Llano's.

Something warm and round remained on Llano's palm. The dark-skinned man mounted his horse, wheeled the animal and loped off after the man and girl. Llano looked at his palm. There, bright and gleaming, was a double eagle, a twenty-dollar gold-piece.

From beside Llano the gray-haired rider commented, "I wouldn't go to Ladron House if I was you, Land. That was Arhtur Cameron, the Duro Grant manager. He's paid you off."

Very slowly Llano put the gold-piece in his pocket. He looked at the gray-haired man. "I reckon," he drawled, "that you're right."

from the gray-haired rider. He met the gray-haired man's eyes, nodded a little, and his thin lips were hard in a sardonic smile. "No," said Llano Land, "I won't go to Ladron House to be thanked."

"Land . . ." mused the gray-haired man. "You wouldn't be Llano Land by any chance, would you?"

"Not by chance," agreed Llano. "I'm Llano Land, right enough."

"Well, then—I'm Dale Fallien, Llano Land, an' we might as well ride on to Ladron."

Llano nodded. Singleshot moved ahead, and Jigger followed. Dale Fallien swung his horse up alongside Singleshot. Llano was looking at the cottonwoods ahead, the cottonwoods through which Cameron and the Raes had disappeared. The goldpiece was hot in his pocket.

"Twenty dollars," drawled Fallien. "Kind of a cheap price to put on the girl he's goin' to marry, you'd think."

Llano said nothing. He was wondering why a girl like Gwynne Rae would be riding a red roan mare—a red pan mare with a little JA branded under the mane down on the left side of the neck.

Fallien's horse took up a trot, and automatically keeping pace Singleshot and Jigger also trotted. Jack Ames's horses, thought Llano Land . . . Jack Ames's horses, and a girl like that!

The canyon, widening further, debouched into a flat. To the right, set among trees, was a great, square building flanked by smaller buildings that were set about like pigs lining the belly of a sleeping sow.

Fallien waved a hand. "Ladron House," he announced.

Llano nodded.

SINGLESOT stood and let Llano walk up to him, Llano mounted, rode over and took Jigger's lead rope

The two rode on, past the house and its surrounding buildings, and now other buildings appeared. This

was Ladron. The horses entered the town, their feet sending up little puffs of dust from the gray dirt of the street.

There were squat abodes on either side of the street, geraniums blooming in a riot of color in the windows of the houses. A man, dark-skinned, black-haired, squatted in the shadow by a house, a corn-husk cigarette between his fingers, and from an open door came a shrill voice calling in Spanish for, "Maria! Ven aca Maria!"

Llano reined in Singleshot, as a child, dark-haired and black-eyed, trotted across the street toward that calling voice. Somnolence sat upon the town, and Llano smiled faintly. He had encountered a thousand such scenes in Sonora and Chihuahua and along the border. To all appearances Ladron might have come from Mexico and been set down intact amid the hills.

Dale Fallien gestured again. "There," he said "is the Saint George Hotel. You might stop there."

Something was amusing Fallien. His voice was quiet but that hint of amusement was unmistakable. Llano shook himself of his thoughts. The horses had stopped in front of a two story building which bore the sign, **Saint George Hotel, 1880**, above the shaded porch.

"Just ten years to collect bedbugs," grinned Llano Land, and the amusement of his voice answered that in the voice of his companion. "Yes. I reckon I could stop here. I've got twenty dollars."

There was a hitch-rail before the Saint George and to it Fallien and Llano fastened their horses. Fallien gravely considering his companion, nodded as though he had made a decision. "I believe I'll go on to town," he stated. "I may see you later, Mr. Land."

Llano said nothing, simply nodded. He had not decided about Dale Fallien. Fallien had known him as Llano Land. There were only two classes of men who pounced upon that name as had Fallien. To which did Fallien belong, outlaw or peace officer? Llano didn't know.

Fallien swung off down the street, his long legs stiff in the stride of the man who has spent his days on horse-back. Llano ducking under the hitch-rail, crossed the shade of the porch, opened the door, and was in the lobby of the Saint George.

THE lobby was deserted. Llano rang the little bell on the desk but the action brought no response. The bell sounded emptily and Llano rang it again. Still there was no answer.

Voices murmured behind a door across the lobby, and going to the door, Llano stood undecided. Presently he rested his hand on the doorknob, turned it gently and the door opened slightly. Llano could see that the door led to a barroom, and he was about to open it wider but the sound of voices arrested him. Two men were talking in the barroom.

"I tell you, Leige Nathan, I got to have a room!" The voice was deep, gruff and strained. "I got to. I got to get Engra to bed an' get the doctor for her. She can't go no further!"

The voice that answered was higher, shrill with worry, almost plaintive. "My Lord, Will, I can't do it! You don't know what it means. You don't know the pressure that's on me, the way it is!"

Llano let the door sag open. He could see the men now, one short, fat, shirt-sleeved, perspiring; the other, big, lean, rawboned and dressed in bib overalls and blue shirt. The big man wore brogans and there was a

straw hat pushed back on his head. Farmer, thought Llano. It was written all over the big man.

The fat Nathan, plainly the hotel proprietor, had his hand on the big man's arm, pleading with him. The big arm shook off that hand.

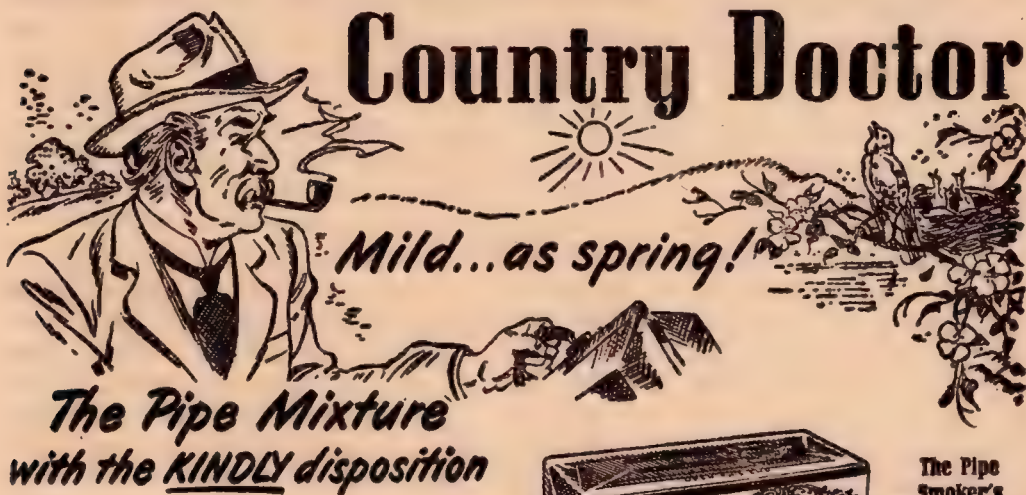
"Pressure!" he growled. "You talk to me about pressure! Think I don't know what it is? First it was Kent Null tryin' to buy my place an' not offerin' half enough. Then fences cut an' cattle in the crop an' Denver Capes comin' over a-sayin' that Grant cattle was bloatin' on my clover an' I had to keep my fences up! Then Dick Wadell comin' out, talkin' about the law an' sayin' that my place was on the Grant! By the Lord, I know where my homestead was! I'd saw the map when I filed. Then, last night the house burnin', and now you won't give me a room for my wife. Maybe I ain't got

the money to pay for it. Maybe you're askin' of the Grant. But I'm goin' to get Engra to bed an' get the doctor! Hear that?"

The last words followed a hollow cough, and for the first time Llano saw the woman. She slumped in a chair, half facing the door, her head lowered. She had stifled the cough in a handkerchief that bore telltale stains. There was no mistaking that cough or the stains. The woman was in the last stages of consumption and the big man was plainly almost at the breaking point. Llano Land hesitated, then stepped back a little from the door.

Nathan's mean voice whined, "I cain't, Loman. They'd . . . you know what they'd do . . ."

Loman, the big man, moved impulsively. His great hands settled on the back of Nathan's neck and he shook the smaller man as a terrier might



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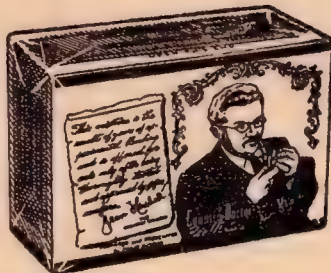
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shake a rat. "By Heaven!" swore Loman, "you'll give me a room, or I'll choke it out of you! I'll—"

The outside door of the barroom opened suddenly—and there was another man in the room, a tall gaunt man dressed in funereal black. His nose was a beak jutting from beneath gleaming black eyes, fanatical eyes, and his voice boomed, deep and ringing, "Brother! Brother!"

Loman seemed to slump. His hands relaxed their grip and the fire went out of his voice and his eyes. "All right, Preacher," he said.

The man in black turned to face Nathan. His arm encircled Loman's shoulders and he seemed to steady the big man. There was accusation in his ringing voice as he said, "And you would turn him away at a time like this! Nathan, you will account to the Lord for this day!"

Nathan was looking at the bar. He did not lift his eyes to face that accusation.

For a moment the tableau held, and then the man in black spoke again.

"Bring your wife, Will. I have a place for you."

Loman, like a man in a trance, walked across to the chair, picked up the frail woman in his arms, and carrying her, went to the door and out. For a moment the minister stood surveying the barroom. His gleaming black eyes passed over the door in which stood Llano Land, went on and settled upon fat Nathan beside the bar. The deep voice spoke once more.

"And the greatest of these is Charity!" rang the voice.

Then the man in black was gone, following those others. By the bar Nathan straightened cautiously, shook himself, and then turned and encountered the bleak gray eyes of Llano Land.

"Maybe," drawled Llano, contempt in his voice, "you could give me a room. I can pay for it, you know."

CHAPTER III

Cameron's Offer

FED, his horses attended to, and himself bathed and refreshed, Llano Land lounged on the porch of the Saint George Hotel and watched the world of Ladron go past. With his boots cocked up on the porch railing and his body cradled in a rawhide-bottomed chair that was more hammock than chair, he smoked and thought.

There was more than one thing to think about. First, there was Mat McCarthy and his little bunch of rustlers. McCarthy was using a part of the Duro Grant in which to hold stolen cattle. Evidently McCarthy had been doing that for some time. That fact predicated another. Someone on the Duro Grant was complacent. Someone on the Duro Grant, someone in authority, was blinking an eye at McCarthy's activities. That was not Llano's business, but it was an item to be considered.

Next, that girl, Gwynne Rae, at Ladron House, was riding one of Jack Ames' horses. Had she bought it from Jack Ames? He could not understand a girl like that getting the horse in any other manner. If she had bought the horse, then Jack Ames had money. Horses could be more easily traced than money. . . .

Llano frowned at the thought. If Ames had sold the horses, it was going to be mighty difficult to find out what had become of him. He would have to find each man or woman who had purchased from Ames, and tracing that tortuous course eventually learn the

fate of his friend. It would be a long, tough job—but he would do it.

Leige Nathan, the hotel proprietor, came out of the door of the Saint George, stopped, and tentatively broached a conversation. "Hot, ain't it?" he said.

Llano fixed the man with a cold eye. He knew just how to deal with men of Nathan's stripe. "Come here," he commanded.

Nathan came over and stood uneasily before Llano. He was not just sure what was coming but whatever it was, he felt certain, it would be unpleasant. Llano had made no attempt to hide his contempt for the man.

"Who are that girl and her brother up at Ladron House?" asked Llano.

Nathan let go a sigh of relief. He had expected something else.

"They're English folks," he said hurriedly. "Come over here from England."

"Yes?" Llano was still questioning.

"Yeah. The Duro Grant was sold to an English company about two years ago," Nathan continued. "This Donald Rae an' his sister come here when the place was sold. He's supposed to be in charge." Nathan ventured a derisive grin.

Llano checked it. "Supposed to be?" he prompted.

"Well," the hotel man was apologetic, "Cameron really runs the Grant. Cameron an' Kent Null."

"An' who is Kent Null?"

"He's the Grant's lawyer. He was here before Cameron come."

"Well?" Again Llano primed the pump.

Nathan chuckled. A mean man, he loved to see others in trouble. "The English company got stuck," he said. "They bought a pig in a poke. They thought that there was boats runnin' up and down Ladron Creek an' a rail-

road right at the town. Now, they're tryin' to sell out."

"And Null's doing the selling?"

"I guess so. Him an' Cameron. They say that Cameron sold a big outfit in California for some folks there an' that's why he's here. He's a good business man, all right."

"Seems to be," agreed Llano, remembering the twenty-dollar gold piece.

"He's goin' to marry that Rae girl."

Nathan was in full stride, now, and had forgotten the antipathy he had toward this cold-eyed questioner. "Maybe he won't sell the Grant when he does that. Her father's a lord or somethin' in England an' he owns most of the stock in the English company that bought from the Miraflores heirs."

"H'mm," Llano murmured thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Cameron's smart. He ain't as smart as Null, though. It ain't generally known, but Null's the man that sold the Grant to the English people in the first place."

"An' now he wants to sell it again," commented Llano. "Why are these Grant people cracking down on the little outfits?"

The question came like a whiplash. Nathan, realizing suddenly that he had talked freely, perhaps too freely, drew back into this shell. "Are they crackin' down?" he asked innocently.

"Don't pull that!" Llano's voice was a contemptuous drawl. "I heard you this morning, remember."

Nathan shrugged. "Anybody cracks down on folks that steal their land," he said defensively. "The Grant is just lookin' after their own interests."

"And you're helping them. . . . One thing more—Who was that preacher that came in?"

"That's Paul Gunther." Nathan felt free to talk again. "He rides a circuit

out of here. Goes over to Marthastown an' on to Bridger. He's a danged nuisance. Talks to the Mexicans an' tells 'em that the Grant is makin' slaves of 'em. Tries to hold revival meetin's at Marthastown. He's gettin' in bad. There's a bunch of *religious folks* that think he's the real stuff, but if he don't keep his mouth shut he'll go out of here with a coat of tar an' feathers. Why, last week he butted in on a dance an'—"

"Yes," Llano dismissed the man, "a fellow like that might be a nuisance, all right. Did you grain my horses like I told you?"

Nathan recognized the dismissal. "I'll go see the barn boy," he said. "I'll see."

"Do so," grunted Llano, and leaned back in his chair again. So Gwynne was the daughter of an English lord. . . .

As he rolled a cigarette and lit it, Dale Fallien came up along the board sidewalk. He stepped onto the porch, and walking over seated himself beside Llano. The older man pushed back his hat, brought a short pipe from his pocket and, having stuffed it and lit it, looked over at his companion.

"Tryin' to figure out what you'll do with that twenty dollars?" he asked.

"I've got it spent," Llano answered placidly. Why did this man rub the raw spot that the twenty-dollar goldpiece had created? Twice he had made caustic comment. Llano wondered. Dale Fallien fitted into a pattern somewhere. Perhaps he fitted into the pattern in Llano's mind.

"Llano Land," mused Fallien. "You worked for the Wells-Fargo people some, didn't you?"

"Some," agreed Llano.

"An' for the city council in Tascasa, an' for the stock association in Texas."

"You overlooked being a Ranger for

four years and that I pretty near got myself killed the time Red River Tom was hung in Watrous." Llano was mildly amused.

"I knew about that," agreed Fallien. His light blue eyes were fixed on Llano. "Wherever you go it seems like there's trouble. Is there goin' to be trouble here?"

THIS was a point-blank question.

Why did Fallien ask it? Certainly if Fallien did not fit into the pattern in Llano's mind, Llano must fit into some sequence in Fallien's brain.

"I couldn't say," Land answered quietly. "You want to remember that if there's been trouble wherever I've been, it was there before I came and was gone when I left."

"I see," said Fallien.

"You may see," Llano corrected placidly. Just as well to give this inquisitive gentleman something to think about.

Fallien's brows wrinkled with thought. "There's trouble here all right," he said softly. "The question is, how were you hired to settle it?"

"The question is, have I been hired?"

Fallien sighed. "I suppose that is the question," he agreed.

Still, Llano liked this man. Coolness and competence were written large upon him. The questions had been prying, true, but there had been no hesitancy in Fallien as he displayed the things he thought. Llano shrugged and threw away his cigarette butt. Maybe he would answer some questions.

"Now," Llano drawled, "suppose you were me, and had made a little strike. Enough to start up a small outfit. What would you do?"

"What I'm doin' now," answered Fallien surprisingly. "I'm too old to change. Yo're too old to change yore ways, Llano Land."

Anger formed in Llano's mind. "I'm not," he said sharply.

Fallien shrugged. "Why are you here then?" he asked.

"I'm here—" But Llano let it drop. He would not answer the questions. "Who besides the Grant people, have money enough to buy thoroughbred horses?" he asked suddenly.

"You got horses to sell?"

"I might have."

Fallien stared away, his eyes blank. "There's Pat Greybull at Marthastown," he said. "I've heard that he came here from Kentucky an' that he likes a thoroughbred."

"Why," returned Llano heartily, "there's maybe a market for me. There's gold at Marthastown and surely there's a good market there for horses."

He stood up abruptly and looked down at his companion. "Wouldn't it be funny if I was selling horses?" he suggested. And with that, he clumped away across the porch, entered the Saint George and went to his room.

In his room, Llano Land settled on his bed. His mind was a turmoil. Too many things to think about. Too many questions. Llano stretched out on the

bed and relaxed his muscles while his mind raced. . . .

It was almost four o'clock when Llano left his room. The porch of the hotel was deserted as he strolled across it. Turning east, he walked down toward the center of town. Ladron was active. There were freight wagons lining a warehouse on a side street and at a stage station men were getting down from a coach that had just arrived. Rough men these, booted and overalled, miners for the most part.

The stage passengers dispersed and Llano walked on a little farther, then entered a building on his immediate left. The little, half-shutter doors swung behind him and he walked across toward the long walnut bar. This was the Exchange Saloon.

At the moment, the Exchange was not heavily patronized. There was only one bartender on duty behind the bar, but the length of that counter and the array of glasses told of much greater patronage. Two men lounged against the bar, eyeing Llano curiously as he approached. At a faro layout a man looked up, lowered his eyes and then looked again as Llano came closer.

Llano, glancing down at the faro

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dealer, nodded a greeting. "Hello, Flaco," he said.

The dealer flushed, his dull-hued skin reddening. His eyes were troubled, but he returned the salutation. "Hello, Land."

Llano smiled a little. He knew why the man was troubled. Flaco had run a wheel in Trinity and had been one of many to whom Llano had issued distinct orders. They had been, "Get out and don't come back!" Llano knew that the man was recalling that occasion. Llano, too, had recollections. . . . Flaco had had a partner in Trinity, a woman. Llano remembered the girl, a vivid, dark creature with fire in her.

He went on to the bar. As he stopped before the counter and ordered his drink from the bartender, the two men who stood there turned their faces away, one of those two wore a star; the other was a rider—cowman, Llano judged, not a puncher. The man's clothing was flamboyant and more costly than the average rider could afford to wear.

The bartender returned to the two after serving Llano. Llano, taking his drink, put the glass back on the bar and laid a fifty cent piece beside it. He had intended engaging the bartender in conversation, but that, apparently, was impossible. Now, he strolled toward the door, nodding once more to Flaco, and went on out.

He did not know that he had barely gotten outside the door before the man with the star began to ask Flaco questions. At Flaco's answers, the star wearer spoke briefly to his companion, then hurried himself out of the saloon. He made for Ladron House.

Llano went on down the street. At a hitch-rail in front of another saloon there were horses. Examining them, Llano saw McClellan saddles on two with blue blankets, each carrying the letters U. S., below the saddles. Army

horses. . . . Llano strolled on, finally stopping beside a striped barber pole. He hesitated a moment and then went into the shop. Barbers, like bartenders, were often founts of information. . . .

He climbed into a chair. "Haircut and a shave," he said.

The barber spread an apron across Llano's chest, fastened a towel about his neck, and stumped over to his shelf for scissors and comb. Llano noted that the man had only one leg. The other ended at the knee and the missing portion had been supplied with wood.

The barber worked silently. When the expected loquaciousness failed to materialize, Llano asked questions of his own.

"Know where a man could get a few good horses around here?" he asked. He hoped that Jack Ames might have stopped here at this shop. If so, the barber would remember, and he might mention the fact.

The barber said, "No," curtly, and then: "Want more taken off the top?"

"You're the doctor," drawled Llano. "There was a fellow selling horses through here around a month ago, wasn't there?"

"I didn't hear of it," said the barber, and his shears snipped.

"I thought maybe there was." Llano's voice was mild.

THE barber softened a trifle. "Not that I know of," he said. "You might get some horses from Cameron at the Grant. Maybe he's got some for sale."

"I'm looking for thoroughbreds," Llano suggested.

The barber stepped back to survey his work. "I ain't seen any," he announced.

"Who's the local law here?" asked Llano.

"Fellow named Wadell—Dick Wadell."

"Good man?"

"It depends on what you want him to be good for," the barber answered. Plainly, he was answering no questions. It was like blasting information out of a rock to get it here, Llano decided.

"There's a big man that wears a fancy vest," Land said, eyeing himself in the mirror as the barber turned the chair. "Seems to team around with Wadell. Who's he?"

"Denver Capes. Grant cowboss." The barber had finished with the hair, and now was laying the chair back preparatory to shaving his customer. Llano let himself relax.

"I saw some cavalry horses in town," he remarked as he settled himself.

"There's a troop at Bridger," said the barber. "Once in a while some of 'em come over. The Government's been keepin' a troop there since the Pueblos got jumpy. Is that towel too hot?"

Llano said that the towel was all right and spoke no more. The barber was certainly far different from the usual run of his profession.

When his shave was finished and he had paid the peg-legged man, Llano went out on the street again. It was now about six o'clock and supper-time. He headed back toward the hotel.

When he entered the lobby Nathan was waiting for him.

"There's a message for you," said the proprietor importantly. "Cameron wants to see you at Ladron House."

"Is supper ready?" asked Llano.

"But Mr. Cameron—" began Nathan.

"Cameron can come and see me," informed Llano, and returned toward the dining-room.

Nathan looked startled. "There's a note for you too," he blurted. "Here."

He held out an envelope, small and of heavy paper.

Llano accepted the note and ripped open the flap. The envelope contained a note, the letters round and smooth. It was from Gwynne Rae . . . She hoped that Mr. Land had not forgotten that he was to see her at Ladron House. Could he come that evening?

Llano refolded the note and placed it thoughtfully in his shirt pocket. "I'll go up after I've eaten," he decided to himself.

When he had finished his meal, Llano went to his room, washed his hands and brushed his clothes again. Then he walked back through the lobby, nodding to Dale Fallien who sat there, and went out. He started up the hill toward Ladron House, in which lights were already beginning to appear.

His knock on the door of the big house was answered by a white-haired native who inquired his business.

"I'm Llano Land," was the reply. "Mr. Cameron sent word to the hotel that he wanted to see me."

The servant stepped aside and invited Llano to enter. Inside the great hall, the man motioned to a seat, asked Llano to wait, and hurried away. Llano sat down and looked at his surroundings.

The place was magnificent. Heavy rugs were on the polished oak of the floor and ancient Navajos of marvelous weave and design hung from the walls. The furniture was heavy, dark with age and gleaming with wax. There were silver candelabra on the table, and silver hand-wrought brackets supported candles on the wall.

Llano held his hat in his hands and waited. Presently he heard voices, and looking up he saw Gwynne Rae and a man in army uniform descend-

ing the stairs. The girl was laughing up at the man.

As they reached the foot of the stairs, Gwynne Rae suddenly saw Llano. With a word to her companion, she hurried across the room, the trim young man in uniform following her. Llano took the hand which the girl held out to him.

"I thought that you weren't coming," said Gwynne Rae, reproachfully. "I expected you this afternoon, Wayne. This is the man that saved my life this morning. Lieutenant Metcalf, Mr. Land."

Llano, releasing the girl's hand, took that of the officer. Llano liked this youngster. There was strength in his grip and his face was pleasant, his brown eyes frank.

"We all owe you our thanks, Mr. Land," said Metcalf. "Life would be unbearable here without Gwynne."

"But you don't come here from Bridger often enough to make it more bearable, Lieutenant," laughed Gwynne Rae. "Mr. Land, this is the first time in a month that Lieutenant Metcalf has ridden over."

The officer flushed. "Duty—" he began.

Behind Llano a suave voice interrupted. "Ah . . . Good evening, Mr. Land."

Land turned. Arthur Cameron, his hand outstretched, was walking toward him.

Llano could do nothing else but take the proffered hand.

"I asked Mr. Land to come and see me," said Cameron. "A matter of business. You will excuse us?"

The girl made a little grimace. "And I thought that you had come to see me," she said to Llano, reproachfully. "I'll excuse you, Arthur, but you must bring Mr. Land back. I haven't thanked him properly for this

morning." She turned away, her hand tucked under the officer's arm.

Cameron, his hand on Llano's shoulder, said:

"Now, Mr. Land."

Llano allowed himself to be led away.

It was an office to which Cameron took Llano Land. There was another man there, a gray-haired, hawk-faced little man whom Cameron introduced as Kent Null. The Grant manager motioned to a chair and, going to a cupboard, produced a bottle and glasses.

"A drink, Mr. Land?" he asked.

"It's a little soon after supper," replied Llano. "No thanks."

Cameron set the glasses and the bottle on the desk and sat down.

"I wanted to talk to you, Land," he began.

"Yes," agreed Llano.

Null had poured and taken a drink. "Just a minute, Arthur," he said to Cameron. "Did you speak to Metcalf?"

"Not yet," replied Cameron. And then, turning to Llano, "Lieutenant Metcalf commands a troop of cavalry stationed at Bridger. He—"

Null interrupted again. "Then I'll talk to him before he leaves," he said. "I'll bid you good-night, Mr. Land. Arthur, I'll see you—"

"Wait while I talk to Land," requested Cameron.

Null settled back into his chair again.

Cameron leaned forward over the desk. "I didn't know you this morning, Land," he began. "Since then I've learned a good deal about you. I know your business."

Llano nodded.

"You have a reputation," Cameron continued. "Now I suppose that you have come over here because you

heard of the trouble we've been having?"

"Have you had trouble?" questioned Llano, innocently.

Cameron waved that aside. "You know that we've been having trouble," he said brusquely. "Since the establishment of the Grant boundary we have had nothing but trouble. There are nesters on our land and they've got to be removed."

"So?" Llano drawled the question.

"Yes. Now I'll make you a proposition. You have a reputation and I suppose you live up to it. I want men who can remove them, but—"

"Now wait," drawled Llano. "You're going to tell me something I don't want to hear and that you don't want to tell me. I'm over here on a private matter. I want to ask you just one thing. Where—"

Cameron's lips narrowed and his eyebrows drew down into a straight, black line. "I'm not interested in anything else right now."

"Now, wait a minute, Land," Cameron, too, arose from his chair. "I want to make you a proposition. I'd like to have you with us but if you won't listen. . . ." He let the words trail off.

"If I won't listen?" prompted Llano.

"A man must either be with me or against me!" Cameron snapped.

"No neutrals?" Llano appeared mildly surprised.

"No!" Cameron answered flatly. "Either you take what I'm going to offer you or get out of Ladrón!"

"You lay it right on the line, don't you?" drawled Llano. Methodically, he felt in his trousers' pocket. His hand came out holding a goldpiece, and he spun it on the desk top.

Llano Land was angry all the way through. His eyes simply had become a washed out gray—blank, watchful and agate hard. His voice, when he spoke, was as hard as his eyes.

"You made a threat and gave an order, Cameron," he said harshly. "There's some money of yours. Pick it up! You say there's no neutrals. That's all right with me."

Cameron's face was flushed red. Rage mottled his eyes. His hand rested on the edge of the desk. There was an open drawer under that hand and a gun in the open drawer. Llano watched Cameron's face. The eyes would tell him when Cameron's hand started down. Llano's own hand rested just at his belt. A Smith and Wesson in a leather holster nestled there beneath his waistband.

"By the Lord, Land—" Cameron began.

Kent Null's voice, quiet, even, a little amused, stopped the angry man.

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"Pick up the goldpiece and sit down, Arthur," he said. "You fool! He'll kill you if you don't!"

Slowly, Arthur Cameron relaxed. Slowly, he picked up the goldpiece and settled back into his chair.

Now Llano Land looked at the lawyer. There was unwilling respect in Llano's eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Land," said Kent Null. "My friend is a little impetuous. I understand that he made a mistake this morning. You won't join us?"

The answer was in Llano's eyes.

Null smiled thinly. "I'm sorry," he said again. "Goodnight, Mr. Land, I'll stay with friend Arthur while you show yourself out."

Llano stepped back. His groping hand found the doorknob and turned it. He let himself out of the office and closed the door.

CHAPTER IV

A Killing for Null

LLANO LAND walked almost blindly across the great hall. Rage, anger, the cold desire for killing that man holds when he sees a rattlesnake, was almost choking him. He made for the door.

As he reached it a silvery voice, calling his name, penetrated his anger.

"Mr. Land."

Llano stopped. Gwynne Rae was coming across the room toward him, and behind her strode Metcalf.

"You aren't going?" questioned the girl. "Now that you have finished your business, haven't you time to stay? I wrote you a note—"

It was because of that note that Llano had come. Cameron might have gone to hell before Llano would have answered his summons, but

Llano had not been able to forego a sight of this girl. The note had brought him, had subjected him to Cameron's offer. Llano's voice was hoarse as he interrupted.

"I'm going," he said.

Gwynne Rae drew back. Her face suffused with colour and her eyes flashed. "You are rude," she said, her voice betraying her anger.

Llano did not answer that accusation. He moved brusquely forward toward the door. Metcalf stopped him.

"Land," snapped the officer, "you can apologize to Miss Rae for your actions. You—"

Llano turned, confronting Metcalf. Here was one he could face; here was an object for his anger.

"And you'll make me, soldier?" he taunted.

Gwynne Rae had recovered herself. Centuries of command were bred into the girl, centuries of composure and of cool courage.

"Mr. Land saved my life, Wayne," she said. "Perhaps that gives him a right to act so. I owe you my thanks, Mr. Land. You have them and now you may go."

This was dismissal. As though doused by a bucket of water, Llano cooled. He opened his mouth to speak, to make some sort of apology for his actions—but somehow the words did not come.

Metcalf, stepping past him, opened the door—and silently Llano went through that door and into the night.

As he walked away from Ladron House a bitter, reckless feeling possessed Llano Land. He had made a fool of himself but there was no recalling his acts or his words. He was a fool.

Still berating himself, he passed the Saint George, passed the dark adobes where peaceful natives slept.

Then, at his elbow, there was light and life and noise.

Llano turned and entered the Exchange Saloon.

The place afforded a far different spectacle from that of the afternoon. There was now a line of men at the tables.

The patrons surrounded the faro stool that was serving for the lookout seat.

Llano knew her. She was Rose Juell. Dark-haired, olive-skinned, her lips a cruel scarlet slash across her face, her black eyes sultry, the girl sat watching the game that Flaco dealt. She was dressed in black satin, the gown cut low, showing perfect throat and shoulders. At the sight of her, Llano's mind jerked back to realities.

Rose Juell's face was as impassive as that of the man Flaco, and her eyes were on the players and the layout. Llano stood looking at her for a long minute.

He knew the fierce anger that could flame in the woman.

As though drawn by his scrutiny, Rose Juell glanced up, and her eyes met Llano's. Her face did not change expression, but for a moment something flamed in her eyes, then she lowered them again to the game. Llano, after that interchange of glances, walked on across to the bar and stood there, waiting for a bartender to come to serve him.

As he stood, back to the room, there was a movement beside him. Turning, Llano encountered the eyes of Dale Fallien.

"And so you went to Ladron House?" questioned the gray-haired man. "I'm surprised that you left so early."

The evident amusement in the voice

of the older man lashed the anger that seethed in Llano. Still he kept his own voice level.

"I doubt that you're much surprised," he answered. "Still," and now



Llano Land.

the anger receded a trifle, "I managed to get Cameron to take back the wages he'd given me."

Fallien's eyebrows shot up in a question, and now all at once the humor of his meeting with Cameron struck Llano. Amusement supplanted the anger.

"It was kind of a sudden jolt to Cameron, too," he observed. "Fact is, if it hadn't been for a man named Null I doubt that we'd have come to any terms."

"So Null was there?" Fallien's voice was whimsical. "Quite a fellow, Kent Null."

"Considerable," agreed Llano. "You know, Fallien, when we were talking this evening you said that I was too old to change my ways?"

Fallien nodded. "I asked if there'd be trouble, too, you remember?" he added.

"I can't say about the trouble," answered Llano Land, "but as far as changing my ways is concerned, you're mistaken. I've changed them."

"Yes?" Surprise showed in Fallien's voice.

"I sure have." And there was a reckless tinge in Llano Land's voice. "I'm working for nothing at a job that I know nothing about. That's a change, isn't it?"

Fallien's face was grave. He had caught that reckless tone. "Land—" he began.

"And just to prove I've changed 'em, I'm buying a drink," continued Llano. "You with the bald head quit fooling around up there and come here!"

He had lifted his voice with the last words, and the bartender further up the bar raised his bald head. . . . He had been bent forward talking to Wadell, the deputy sheriff of Ladron, and to Wadell's companion, Denver Capes, the Grant cowboss.

"Come here," ordered Llano imperiously. "Quit wasting your time with the dead-beats and bring a bottle!"

Llano interrupted. "You'll drink with me, Fallien," he said, and he made no attempt to lower his voice, "an' if those shorthorns have any objection to me taking their pet barfly you can stand by an' see 'em curried!"

Fallien shrugged. "So somebody stepped on yore pet corn," he said, low voiced. "Just like a kid, Land. You got yore feelin's hurt an' now you want to take it out on anybody that's handy."

THE words cut like a knife through Llano's mind. He was acting like a kid and he was taking out his anger on strangers. Foolish, but he had gone too far. If Capes and Wadell chose to resent his words he could only back them up.

But apparently there was no resentment in the pair. They said nothing. The bartender came, carrying a bottle and glasses, and set them before Llano and Fallien. "Yes, sir, Mr. Land," he said.

Llano looked at Fallien. "Will you take a drink with a danged fool?" he asked apologetically.

Fallien smiled faintly and lifted the bottle. "It must have been pretty bad," he mused. "I'll take a drink, Land."

The two poured modest drinks, swallowed them and put their glasses down on the bar. Fallien had retired into his mind. Something was going on behind his blank, blue eyes.

The bald bartender came back to them. "There's a lady wants to speak to you, Mr. Land," he said.

Llano turned. Rose Juell was no longer at the lookout's seat at the faro game. "She's in a booth at the end of the room," said the bartender.

Llano looked at Fallien. Fallien nodded. "I'll wait for you," he said.

Rose Juell was sitting in the booth. She did not look up as Llano stood in the entrance but continued to stare down at the table. Llano stepped in, seated himself opposite the girl and spoke to the bartender, who had accompanied him.

"Whatever the lady wants to drink," ordered Land.

"Wine." Rose Juell's voice was low and husky. The bartender hurried away and Llano sat with his hands on the table, waiting for the girl to speak again.

But it was not until the bartender had brought the wine and glasses and had again departed that Rose Juell spoke.

"This town is a hell-hole," said the girl. "Why are you here, Llano?"

"Why should I tell you?" parried Llano.

"Are you here to work with Wadell and Capes?" The girl was insistent. "Did Cameron hire you?"

"I haven't a cent of Cameron's money," Llano answered honestly.

"Cameron!" Rose Juell spat the word. Now she lifted her eyes from the glass and looked full at Llano. There was hatred in those eyes, hatred and something else.

"Where did you go after you left Trinity, Rose?" Llano asked.

"What do you care?" returned the girl. "You ran Flaco out of Trinity. I went to Greenwall at the same time as Flaco." Defiance in her voice now—defiance and, perhaps, apology.

"I was sorry that breaking up Flaco's game at Trinity affected you, Rose." Llano looked at his glass. "I hadn't a choice."

"I—Well, drop it, Llano. I'm all right as long as I work here . . . if Cameron . . ."

"So!" said Llano Land, suddenly realizing why Rose Juell had spat that word, "Cameron!" "Flaco is a weak

sister, Rose. Maybe I can do something about Cameron."

"Why should you bother yourself about Cameron?" asked the girl, her eyes on Llano's face. Was there something appealing, something soft, in those eyes?

Llano spoke swiftly. "I think you've got this wrong, Rose," he said. "You think I'm here because—"

He stopped. Why did Rose Juell think he was here? Llano didn't know.

"I'm looking for horses," he began again. "Seven thoroughbreds. They belonged to Jack Ames. He branded a little JA on the neck. There was a red roan mare—"

ROSE JUELL moved her hand impatiently and Llano stopped abruptly. "What would I know about horses?" she asked. "Why do you talk about horses to me? I'm here, Llano. Here in the middle of this thing. You are here. I—"

Llano stared at his glass. "You—" he began.

"Take me out of here, Llano." Rose Juell leaned forward. There was pleading in her voice. "Take me out of this. Get your horses and we'll ride. You can't win this game."

"Game?" Llano parried. "What game, Rose?"

The girl shifted nervously. "Are

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you a fool, Llano Land?" she asked. "Don't you know what you're against here? You sit there and ask me what game!"

"And what about Flaco?" questioned Llano Land harshly. "What is he to you? Did you coax him to get you out of Trinity?"

"He's nothing to me but someone who had some money, who could help me get out of Trinity." She stood up, and left Llano abruptly.

When Llano reached the bar, a second later, Fallien was standing just as Llano had left him. There was still the faint expression of amusement on the tall man's face and for a moment Llano thought that Fallien must know what had happened in the booth.

Fallien lifted his eyebrows as Llano came up and Llano, nodding, said, "Let's go, Fallien. That is, if you're through here."

Fallien nodded agreement and Llano drew money from his pocket to pay for the drinks. While he waited for his change there was a commotion at the door. Fallien grunted like a man hit low.

Turning, Llano saw the cause of the activity. In the doorway was a man in bib overalls, hatless and disheveled. Llano recognized him. It was Will Loman, the man who had been at the St. George. Loman's eyes were those of a maniac. Fascinated, Llano followed the direction of those insane eyes. The crowd, sensing that something was coming, had drawn slightly apart and Llano could see Kent Null, immaculate and cool, standing at the bar. There was an open lane between Kent Null and Loman in the doorway.

Beside Llano, Dale Fallien stood motionless. Llano, shifting his gaze, saw Dick Wadell further down the bar. At a table, Denver Capes, the Grant cowboss, had risen and was

standing, staring at the new arrival.

Loman's voice croaked from the doorway, "Engra's dead!"

A hush followed those two words. Men stood with glasses poised; half lifted. At the faro layout, Flaco held his hand above the case and did not move it.

A big teamster sighed heavily and, as though that sigh were a signal, Loman lurched forward, his voice rumbling as he moved.

"You killed her, Null! You drove us off our place. You stole it an' it killed Engra. Damn your black soul! I'll kill you, Null, I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

Kent Null still stood at the bar. He had not moved. His face had gone a little pale but there was no tremor in his body, no movement that might betray fear of the great, bear-like man who came toward him, big, gnarled hands half open and outstretched. A woman screamed—Rose Juell, Llano knew—and then heavy in the silence of the room came two thundering shots.

Loman stopped his lurching progress. Surprise supplanted the mask of insane hatred in his face, and he half turned.

"Why . . ." he said querulously, almost as a child might speak when commanded to cease some pleasant occupation. Then the big knees buckled. Loman's overalls bagged as he settled into them, sliding down an invisible wall to slump on the floor. He moved once on the floor—a little, pawing movement of the hands—and then he was still.

Bedlam took the place of the quiet in the Exchange. And, then, through that bedlam came Kent Null's voice, cool, his words concise.

"Thank you, Wadell. You did your duty."

Llano turned a little. Clear of the bar Dick Wadell stood, a smoking gun in his hand, and at the poker table Denver Capes was holstering a weapon and moving clear of his chair. Close to Llano, the baldheaded bartender spoke to someone.

"You run an' get Mulligan, Chuck. Tell him to bring his shutter."

CHAPTER V

Jack Ames

THE NEXT MORNING, Llano was up early. He did not wait for the Saint George's dining-room to open, but went out of the hotel and down toward the town. Mulligan's shop was closed and Llano had to wait. He ate breakfast at a little restaurant where teamsters were also satisfying their hunger, and while he ate he was forced to hear again and yet again a recounting of the scene he had witnessed in the Exchange. But it was more than that he heard. There was a grim undercurrent in the talk among these rough men. Pity for Loman was expressed and one outspoken youngster slapped his high boots with his coiled whip and said what he thought of Wadell.

"If you ask me," said the teamster, "Wadell's no better than a murderer. The Grant has got a bunch of bad ones an' Wadell leads 'em. What's Capes but a killer, an' that tinhorn Flaco an' his greaser pardner, Huerta? They all come from the same tree. Some day somebody's goin' to take that outfit out an' hang 'em an' when they do they might as well take Cameron an' Null an' His Nibs with 'em."

"Careful," an older driver said. "You're workin' for the Grant, ain't you?"

"What do I care?" the boy said. "I ain't tied to this job. Rae's supposed to be the big boss, ain't he? Well, then, why does he stand for Cameron an' the rest?"

Another, a weather-beaten, quiet man, interposed a word. Llano recognized him as the man who had driven the stage in to town the day before.

"Rae's too busy ridin' and' doin' what he calls huntin' to pay attention to the Grant," said the stage-driver bitterly. "His Nibs is high an' mighty an' he leaves the dirty work to Cameron. I'm like Dan, here. I think that sooner or later we're goin' to have to do somethin'. Wait till one of you boys has his pardner shot off the seat beside him, like I had mine, an' see how you feel!"

Llano pricked up his ears at that. He had heard nothing of a stage robbery. When had it happened? he wondered.

The talk lapsed and Llano paid his bill and went out. As he emerged from the restaurant he saw Mulligan unlocking his shop, and went across the street to speak to the man. Mulligan turned as Llano came up.

"About Loman and his wife," Llano said awkwardly, "I want to pay for their funerals. I don't want Wadell to spend a dime and I don't want 'em buried in the potter's field."

Mulligan's hard face softened imperceptibly. "Wanted to pay for 'em, did you?" he rasped. "Well, they're all paid for."

"They are?" Llano was surprised. Then—"If Wadell paid you, hand it back to him. If you don't want to, give the money to me an' I'll hand it back."

Mulligan smiled. "It wasn't Wadell," he said. "I'd give it back to him myself if it was. Nope. It was another party."

"An' not anyone from Ladrón House?" insisted Llano. "I—"

"An' it didn't come from Ladrón House," interrupted Mulligan. "I was asked not to say a thing about it, an' I won't."

Balked, Llano asked another question. "When's the funeral?"

"This afternoon," said Mulligan. "Now I got to get busy. I got Loman laid out but I got to shave him and dress him."

"If you need anything—" began Llano.

"I don't need a thing," answered Mulligan. "Hell! Think I ain't never done this before? The woman had me stumped at first. Seemed like everybody was scairt to have anythin' to do with the Lomans, but Rose Juell is goin' to dress her an' fix her hair, so I got that tended to."

LLANO stood there for a little time looking at the barber. Mulligan's last words had set Llano to thinking. Rose Juell! She was going to dress Engra Loman. Put clothing on that pitiful body for the last time. For the last time comb the thin hair and then cross the worn hands.

"The undertakin' business," said Mulligan, breaking into Llano's thoughts, "is pickin' up. Two last month an' now these two."

"Two?" asked Llano, instantly alert.

"Two," said Mulligan. "There was the shotgun messenger off the stage, an' a cowboy that was found here in town."

Llano's question was sharp. "A cowboy?" he asked.

"Some fellow that nobody seemed to know." Mulligan appeared to be in a talkative mood. "Fellow about yore size with yellow hair an' a birthmark on his chin. Found him layin' out in an alley without a cent on him or a

thing to tell who he was. I fixed him up an' Gunther buried him."

"A birthmark?" Llano asked slowly.

"Right on his chin," agreed Mulligan. "A little red wedge."

"Nothin' else to show who he was?" asked Llano, keeping his voice even.

"Not much," answered Mulligan. "He'd had his left leg broke below the knee sometime or other. Some devil had slid a knife into him an' emptied his pockets. Didn't leave a thing."

Jack Ames! Jack Ames with yellow hair and a wedge-shaped birthmark and a left leg broken below the knee. Llano remembered when Jack had broken that leg, riding a bad one. Jack Ames was dead, and here, standing before Llano, was the man who had buried him.

"What did Wadell do about that?" asked Llano, not realizing that his voice was harsh.

Mulligan looked questioningly at the man before him. "Why, not much," he answered. "He brought him in to me an' he made some inquiries around. The fellow had been showin' a big roll around town the night before an' that's all he learned."

"And they took him for his roll," said Llano, slowly. "Thanks, Mulligan." He turned, then, and walked up the street. Mulligan, after a momentary pause, went into the barbershop.

Llano went on to the Saint George. He slumped into a chair on the porch. There he stared moodily out across the street. He had known that Jack Ames was dead and still he could not reconcile himself to the confirmation of that knowledge. Ames, dead, and buried in a potter's field, and Llano Land alive and here.

There was nothing that Llano could do for Jack Ames now, but there was something that he could do for Llano

Land. He could stay here in Ladron. A cautious inquiry here, a careful checking on who had bought the horses and when, a word overheard, men watched and weighed, and sometime Llano Land would know who had killed Jack Ames. Then he would know what to do.

Dale Fallien mounted the steps to the porch, seated himself and looked sharply at Llano. Llano continued to stare out across the street. Fallien rolled a cigarette, and respecting his companion's mood, maintained the silence. Presently Leige Nathan came out and turned and looked at his two guests.

"Dinner's ready," said Nathan.

Fallien arose and Llano got up slowly from his chair. They went inside.

The two ate their dinner together in silence. When they were finished, Fallien spoke.

"You goin' to the funeral?" he asked, softly.

Llano nodded.

"So am I," returned Fallien. "I'll meet you on the porch in about half an hour."

With that he left and Llano went to his room. There he made a careful toilet, cleaning his boots, brushing his hat and clothing, donning a clean shirt and a black string tie.

WHEN it was time to go, Llano walked out through the corridor to the lobby. Fallien was outside on the porch, and nodding to Nathan, Llano went on through the lobby and joined the tall man. They walked down the street together, wordless, their boot-heels sounding sharply on the sidewalk boards. Llano spoke.

"I don't know why, Fallien," he said, "I don't know you nor your business, but here I am with you. When I step in to take a drink, you're there, when I eat a meal you're there, when I walk down the street, there you are. Why, Fallien?"

"Ladron's a small place, Land."

"But that doesn't explain it," Llano answered. "Are you crowding me?"

"I might ask you the same," Fallien replied tonelessly. "I find you wherever I go. Are you crowding me, Land?"

Llano stopped. Fallien likewise halted and the two looked at each other. Suddenly Llano shook his head. "I'm a fool," he said. "Forget it, will you? I'm just jumpy."

"Why," said Fallien, "I might be jumpy too. We'll both forget it."

Again they resumed their walk.

As they neared the center of the little town they began to encounter more and more people. There were wagons tied to hitch-rails, wagons with

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women in them. Men stood in the shade of porch awnings, little groups of grim-faced fellows, sun hardened and toughened by the desert. Strange faces these, faces of men that did not belong in Ladron, and Fallien striding beside Llano muttered to himself.

"What's that?" queried Llano.

"I don't like it," muttered Fallien.

"You don't like what?"

"I don't like this crowd in town," Fallien answered. "If the Grant men are wise they'll keep out of sight."

"Why?" asked Llano.

"Look at this crowd," replied Fallien. "Can't you feel it, Land?"

They were passing a little group of men as Fallien spoke and Llano looked at the hard, harsh faces.

"Pretty salty," he said, low voiced.

"You reckon . . . ?"

"They're in town for Loman's funeral," Fallien explained. "If John Kinney or Park Frazier was in town I'd say that it might be somethin' else. Kinney's in jail in Bridger an' Frazier's out of town to—"

"Who are they?" interrupted Llano.

Fallien glanced at his companion. "You've been here a day," he said brusquely. "Didn't Cameron tell you about Kinney? Didn't he mention Frazier?"

"Cameron," Llano said slowly, "tried to hire me to jump nesters off their claims. Cameron says that there are nesters on Grant land. We talked about that and that was all."

For a moment there was disbelief in Fallien's eyes. Then those eyes were masked with blankness again. "The new Grant boundary has just been confirmed by the territorial legislature," he said slowly. "I reckon there are nesters on Grant Land."

"And . . . ?" prompted Llano.

"There's Grant an' Anti-Grant Land here," continued Fallien when they

had gone a few steps. "John Kinney an' Park Frazier are the men that lead the Anti-Grant. An' that's why I'd say there'd be trouble if they were here."

"You know a lot about it," said Llano dryly.

"It's my business—" began Fallien. Then checking suddenly, "I know somethin' about it, Land."

Llano looked quizzically at his companion. If Fallien had completed that sentence he would have said, "It's my business to know about such things." Was there a star under Fallien's shirt? Was there a little gold shield of a deputy U.S. marshal fastened in some hidden spot on his clothing? Or was Dale Fallien a professional troubleshooter, a man seeking employment? Was he a spy, or what was he?

"Here's the church," announced Fallien. "Shall we go in?"

"Might as well," agreed Llano.

CHAPTER VI

Rose Juell Speaks

GWYNNE RAE did not sleep well.

She had remained with Wayne Metcalf for half an hour after Llano Land's departure and then had excused herself. Arthur Cameron and her brother had come in and joined them and she left the three men deep in a discussion of horse breeding.

In her room when she had undressed, she had sat for a long time beside her dressing table. Llano's actions and words had puzzled her and had hurt her. She had reacted instinctively and now she was wondering what had caused it all.

As she sat beside her dressing table she was stirred from her thoughts by two dull, booming explosions. For

a while longer she sat, waiting, listening to hear if those shots were repeated. Then, finally, when there was no more sound, she had extinguished her lamp and gone to bed.

She lay beneath her coverlet, her mind busy. Something had been done, something had been said to Llano Land that had caused that fierce outburst. She had questioned Metcalf concerning her rescuer and Metcalf, knowing something of Llano, had answered her questions. Now the brown, lean face of the man with anger blazing from his eyes, came between the girl and sleep. Llano Land! Some of his exploits, some of his adventures, Metcalf had told her, and seeing the man himself had intrigued her fancy and made the tales more true. What had happened that had lighted that fierce fire? The girl could not surmise, try as she might.

When she slept her slumber was troubled and when she wakened the next morning Llano Land was still in her thoughts.

At breakfast that morning her brother was silent and the talk was between Cameron and Metcalf. These tried to arouse Donald Rae's interest, bringing up both horses and hunting, subjects at which Rae generally was eloquent, but this day he did not respond. When he did break his silence it was to ask a question.

"Where is Kent?" he asked, looking at Cameron.

Cameron shook his head slightly. "Kent has gone out of town for a day or two," he answered. "Capes is with him."

Donald Rae disregarded that headshake. "Is that on account of what happened last night?" he persisted.

Cameron looked annoyed and Metcalf seemed worried. "Kent had business in Bridger," said Cameron.

"There are papers to sign at the courthouse. He has gone over to attend to that."

Rae appeared satisfied with the explanation and asked no more questions. Talk lapsed, after that, about the breakfast table.

ALL during the morning Gwynne

Rae busied herself about Ladron House. She had assumed ordering of the household since her advent, acting as chatelaine of the castle, and she took a pride in the management of the great house.

At noon, when luncheon was served, she joined Metcalf in the hall and they stood waiting for Cameron and her brother. Gwynne Rae looked up at the soldierly young fellow in uniform who stood beside her. Metcalf's face was calm but there were firm lines about the eyes, and the mouth was tight and strong. Gwynne knew that this man loved her. He rode from Bridger, a distance of sixty-five miles, coming as often as he could for a few hours with her. A gentleman, Wayne Metcalf, with generations of breeding behind him. His eyes were kind as he looked down at the girl.

"What happened in Ladron last night, Wayne?" demanded Gwynne. "Why was Arthur so upset this morning?"

Wayne Metcalf spoke honestly. "There was a man killed in town last night," he said, evenly. "A man named Loman. Dick Wadell was forced to shoot him to prevent his killing Kent."

"But—" began Gwynne.

"Loman's wife had died," continued Metcalf. "It seemed that he blamed Null for that. The man must have been insane with grief. He attacked Kent in a saloon and Wadell was forced to shoot to save Kent's life."

"But Arthur," persisted Gwynne,

"why should that effect him? He asked—"

Cameron and Donald Rae, entering the room at the moment, cut short the question.

"Lunch?" said Cameron. "My dear, you can't imagine how pleasant it is to have this place managed so well, particularly by so charming a manager."

Donald Rae put his hand beneath his sister's arm and they walked to the dining-room together.

When the meal was finished Metcalf drew Gwynne aside. He must leave the next morning, he said, and now while he was here, would Gwynne be kind to him? Would she ride with him that afternoon?

Of course Gwynne would When she came down from her room after changing to her riding habit, the officer was waiting in the hall and the saddled horses were before the door. Metcalf helped the girl to mount, cradling her foot for a brief instant in his locked hands, then when he had mounted his big cavalry charger the two cantered away from Ladron House.

Their ride led them far afield. At times they rode slowly, side by side, and Gwynne Rae listened while Metcalf in his slow, Southern drawl, spoke of his home in Virginia, and of his mother and sisters there. The girl knew what the young officer was leading to and the knowledge thrilled her. Still, when his voice lowered further and he began to speak of himself, she would not let him continue. . . .

The red roan mare was faster than the charger, she told him. The girl laughed tauntingly. They must race. And Metcalf, wisely falling in with her spirit, forbore saying the thing that was uppermost in his heart and

accepted the challenge quite gaily.

So they rode, and when the sun lowered a little, returned to Ladron, choosing another route than the one that they followed on the ride out. So it was that approaching the town they topped a hill and riding down its side, they saw a group of people gathered together. Both realized too late that they had come to the graveyard.

Metcalf tried to turn aside and circle the cemetery but Gwynne would not be dissuaded. She was suddenly contrite. Why should she have enjoyed herself in the company of this man who loved her, when here on the hillside there was sorrow and heart-break and suffering?

"We must go down, Wayne," she insisted gently. "After all, it is the least we can do. . . ."

So Wayne Metcalf rode beside the girl down the hill until they reached the outskirts of the crowd.

LLANO LAND and Dale Fallien came out of the church with their hats in their hands. They stepped aside from the door and waited until the rest of those people who had listened to Paul Gunther, emerged. Women in calico carrying their sun-bonnets; children in clothing that had been cut down for them from worn-out garments of their elders; hard, brown-faced men — the congregation that had listened to the funeral services of Will and Engra Loman filed out and stood in the churchyard.

When the pine boxes that contained the bodies had been carried from the door and put in the bed of a wagon, Mulligan mounted to the driver's seat and, starting the team, began a last slow journey up the little hill above the church. On foot, the dust streaming up as they walked, the people

followed, and suddenly Llano found that he was not alone with Dale Fallien, but that Rose Juell walked between them. Rose placed her hand on Llano's arm and silently fell in step with him.

The journey was short. Atop the hill, not three hundred yards from the church, there were two open graves. Into these, one at a time, Mulligan and three others lowered the pine boxes that some native carpenter had made, and when they stepped back, Paul Gunther came forward.

"There is nothing more to say," said Paul Gunther, standing at the heads of the graves, and his voice rang deep with the words: "Commend the souls of these two, man and wife, to God, and their memories to the hearts of their friends. Earth to earth. . . and clods rattled down upon the wooden boxes . . . "ashes to ashes . . . dust to dust . . . let us pray."

Heads were bowed and there was silence. Then Gunther lifted his head and turned, and Mulligan, spitting upon his hands, seized a shovel and again earth rattled down on the hollow pine. About Llano Land and Rose Juell and Dale Fallien, men and women stirred and turned and low voices that had been stilled by Gunther's eloquence began to hum once more. Llano put his hand beneath Rose's arm and with Fallien on the other side, they started down the hill, following the slowly moving crowd.

It was then, not fifty feet from the graves, that Gwynne Rae swung the roan mare into their path and stopped them. Llano stepped forward, his face uplifted and his eyes eager.

"I—" Gwynne Rae began. "Mr. Land—"

But the thing she had been about to say was never finished. Rose Juell,

after one glance at the face of the man beside her, wrenched her arm from Llano's grasp and stood at Gwynne Rae's stirrup. The rage that possessed her showed in the hard, resentful face which she turned to the younger girl.

"You!" flared Rose Juell. "You have the nerve to come here. You dared to come after what you've done! It was you and your kind that killed Engra Loman. You and your brother and Kent Null and Arthur Cameron that drove Will Loman crazy. You took the roof off his wife's head. That killed her! She was already dying of consumption, but that made no difference to you. She hadn't a place to stay! She hadn't—"

What more she might have said cannot be known, for Metcalf at last caught the roan's bridle and swung the mare, and Paul Gunther coming up, his face sorrowful but his eyes glowing and bitter, laid his hands on Rose Juell's shoulders and swung her toward him. Sobs shook Rose as Gunther held her, while on the red roan mare, Gwynne Rae, the proud English girl, sat, her head bowed, her body huddled into her broadcloth riding habit.

Llano Land watched Metcalf lead Gwynne's mare away. He watched Paul Gunther shepherd Rose Juell toward the church, and then he felt a hand on his shoulder. Dale Fallien's voice drawled words in his ear.

"I reckon it had to happen," said Fallien, "But—Good Lord. . . !"

At that moment Mulligan, his work finished, came up and stopped beside them. The barber's square face was impassive.

"The job's done," he announced.

Fallien took a hand in his pocket, pulled out money and handed a gold-piece to the barber.

"Thanks, Mulligan," he said.

Here was the answer to a riddle Llano had asked himself. An answer that proposed a new riddle. Dale Fallien had paid for the funerals of the Lomans. Why? Out of regard for the man and his wife—or had Fallien, as had Llano himself, been filled with the determination that these two should go out of the world without a debt to the Duro Grant?

CHAPTER VII

Masked Riders

FALLIEN and Land walked back toward the center of town. There were still wagons on the streets, men riding in from the direction of the church. There were, too, little groups of men standing here and there. Some of the faces were familiar to Llano, some he had seen during his short sojourn in Ladron. It was plain that the town was dividing, separating into two parts, each faction choosing a location, each faction waiting for the other to make a move.

"I don't like it," said Fallien. "It looks bad, Land."

Llano made no reply for a moment. But as they walked on, presently he drawled, "There won't be anything."

"An' why not?" demanded Fallien sharply.

"Because," said Llano, "there's nobody to start it. If Null was to show up or if Wadell was to stick his head out, the whole thing might blow up, but Null an' Wadell are too wise for that."

"Mebbe yo're right," agreed Fallien.

"I am right," Llano assured him. "Wait an' you'll see. There! What did I tell you?"

One of the little groups on a corner had broken up. Three of the men who

had stood there walked over to a wagon and, untying the team, climbed into the seat and the bed, backed the team away from the rack and started down the street. Another man went into a store and emerged followed by a woman and a tow-headed boy. They also sought a wagon, backed it out, and began a slow progress toward the edge of town.

Fallien looked at Llano with relief plain in his face.

Llano shrugged. "There isn't a man in the bunch," he remarked casually. "There's maybe some part-men that would follow a leader, but there isn't a man."

"You talk like you were sorry," snapped Fallien. "You sound like you wish there'd be trouble."

"Maybe I do," returned Llano. And then, abruptly, "So long, Fallien."

He left the tall man staring after him and went on up the street toward the Saint George.

Llano had decided to move. It was past four o'clock but he wanted to shake the dust of Ladron's streets from him, wanted to get away. This trouble was sucking like quicksand at his feet. He could feel it drawing him in and down. And it was not his trouble, not his business.

Despite the strength of the feelings that welled in his mind when he thought of Engra and Will Loman, despite the pain that arose, sharp and somehow sweet when he thought of Gwynne Rae, Llano Land would not let himself be immersed. He was, in the final analysis, an onlooker, a spectator. His business was not with the Duro Grant, nor yet with the troubles of those who dwelt upon the Grant property. His business, and he forced himself to recall the fact, was to investigate the death of Jack Ames. And that was all—not Gwynne Rae,



As Wadell and Null came abreast of him, Hamarick threw up his hands, and the horses stopped.

not Kent Null, not Arthur Cameron nor Flaco nor Rose Juell, but Jack Ames' murderer.

Llano turned in at the door of the Saint George and called for Nathan. When the hotel proprietor came, Llano spoke shortly.

"I'm pulling out for Marthastown," he said. "I want my gray horse. You keep the other on here till I get back."

STRADDLING the leather and turning Singleshot away from the hotel, Llano rode west, up the hill past Ladron House.

In front of Ladron House stood three cavalry horses, and two men, both in uniform, eyed Llano as he passed. One of these bore the stripes of a sergeant

and the other was without mark of rank. Llano nodded to them and went on.

Singleshot was a pacing horse. There were those who believed that a pacer can never be used as a cowhorse but even they cannot refute the fact that a pacer covers ground. Singleshot, between daylight and dark, could put a hundred miles behind him—and now, fresh and strong from his long rest, the big lead-colored gelding fairly ate up distance.

Still Llano did not urge the horse. He knew that somewhere between Ladron and Marthastown there would be a place to stop. The very nature of the country demanded that there be such a resting place, for at the head

of Ladron Canyon the roads must branch, one toward Marthastown and the other toward Bridger. That would be the site for a stopping place and Ladron Canyon was not over twenty-five miles long. So Llano rode easily, letting Singleshot choose his gait and his path along the wagon road, while his rider watched the country.

His mind was busy as he rode. He had played a fool, he told himself, when he had refused Cameron's offer of employment. Given the knowledge that he now had concerning Jack Ames' death, he might have acted differently. The red roan mare that Gwynne Rae rode was an Ames horse. Llano would have given a good deal to know how the girl had come to own that horse. But by his actions, he had definitely cut himself off from any chance of obtaining that knowledge. He couldn't go to Cameron and ask how the Grant had come into possession of the mare. Not now he couldn't.

There was a chance that he might strike a lead in Marthastown. Discreet inquiries in the mining camp might unearth information. So Llano thought as Singleshot paced along. At least the trip would take him out of Ladron, and at the moment Llano wanted to be away.

He passed the mouth of the little canyon that led up to the pass to the Rincon. For a moment he was tempted to turn aside and go to McCarthy's. He could tell McCarthy what he had learned concerning Jack Ames' death and perhaps McCarthy could help him. Then Llano put the idea aside. He did not want to see McCarthy. He wanted to see no one, talk to no one, until his mind was more at rest.

Beyond the little canyon Llano came upon a wagon train, six wagons, each with four teams of mules, travel-

ing toward Ladron. He passed the train, nodding to the drivers on their horses, and to the roustabouts who sat upon the wagons, and continued on his way. The sun had slipped behind the brown top of the big mountain at the head of the canyon. There were shadows, deep and dark, on the road. To Llano's left a creek came down. Singleshot, unchecked, watered at the creek and then went on.

Now the shadows merged and another creek ran into the canyon from the left. Climbing a long hill, Singleshot stopped at the top to breathe. The hills spread out to right and left, and before Llano lay a valley, bathed in the dusk. In the valley, lights glowed dimly at a house. The lead-colored gelding swelled his ribs and sighed, swelled and sighed again, and then under the urge of a nudging heel, went on down the slope.

As he climbed the hill Llano had left Ladron creek. Now he encountered it again; three little forks coming together to make the main stream. He crossed two of these and riding up a little slope was at a building with corrals and a barn behind it. A man hurried from the barn, and as Llano dismounted, a plump, gray-haired little woman appeared on the porch of the house.

"Can I stop the night?" asked Llano.

"This is a hotel," answered the woman on the porch. "Come in."

[LLANO removed his saddlebags, gave terse orders to the native that held Singleshot's reins, and climbed the steps to the porch. The little woman held the door open and Llano walked into the light.

Signing his name on the register, Llano asked concerning supper and was informed that it would be ready as soon as he wished it. He was forced

to smile at the gray-haired woman who spoke so quickly. "I just want to wash," he said.

"You can wash in your room," announced the woman. "You come this way, Mr. Land."

Llano followed her as, lamp in hand, she went down a corridor. She opened a door, put the lamp on a table and showed him where there was a wash-basin and towel. "I'm Mrs. Stamps," she announced as she returned to the door. "Mostly them I know call me Gra'maw. You wash an' clean up an' supper'll be ready for you." With that she was gone, leaving Llano chuckling. He could readily understand why Mrs. Stamps was known as "Gra'maw." She must mother the whole community!

As soon as he had removed the dust of travel, Llano returned to the lobby. There a man sat reading, his back to Llano as he entered. The reader turned as Llano, startled, returned the nod. The man was Kent Null.

"Headed for Marthastown, Mr. Land?" queried Null, folding the paper he held and putting it into an inner pocket.

"I'll go there in the morning," replied Llano. "Are you riding over?"

Null nodded. "Yes. Tomorrow. I have business there for the Grant."

Llano made no reply to that and

Gra'maw Stamps appeared in a door to the right and informed Llano that supper was ready.

While he ate the meal, Llano pondered on Null's presence. He wondered if there was someone with Null and what Null might be doing in Marthastown. Finally, when the meal was finished, he arose from the table and returned to the lobby. Null was still there and with him was black-haired Dick Wadell. Llano would have passed them by, going on to the porch, but Null stopped him.

"You know Mr. Wadell, Mr. Land?" he asked, and when neither spoke—"Let me make you acquainted then."

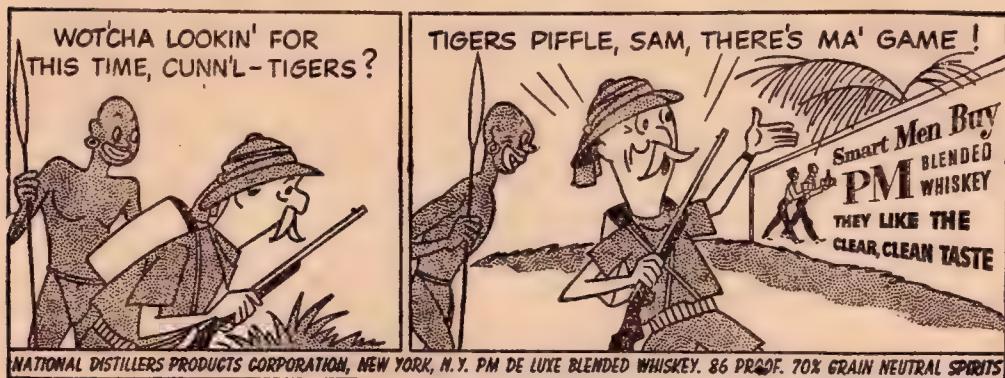
Wadell held out his hand and perforce Llano took it. He dropped Wadell's hand after a perfunctory pressure and started on toward the porch. Again Null stopped him.

"We would be glad if you would ride with us to Marthastown, Mr. Land."

"If we start at the same time," Llano agreed cautiously, mentally making up his mind that the start would not be simultaneous.

"Your time will be ours," Null said graciously. "Will you have a cigar, Mr. Land?"

"Thanks," said Llano shortly. "I don't use 'em." And, turning again, he made his way to the porch.



Sitting on the steps, he rolled a cigarette, and smoked reflectively, for a while. He had thrown that cigarette away and was rolling another when Null came out alone and stood above him.

"Pretty night," said Null.

"Nice," agreed Llano. Llano lit his cigarette. Null seated himself on the steps beside him.

"That's quite a horse you ride," commented Null, looking at his companion.

"Pretty fair," answered Llano.

"Fast," said Null. "Ever race him?"

"No." Llano puffed his smoke.

"Cameron said he came up on that mare of Gwynne's as though she were standing still." Null's voice was cheerful. Apparently he chose to disregard Llano's ungraciousness. "I told Arthur that the mare was too spirited for Gwynne."

"That roan mare is a good horse," Llano offered. He had turned toward Null now and was looking intently at the lawyer. If Null wanted to talk horses, perhaps Llano could find out how the Grant had come by the roan. "Was she bred around here?"

NULL, sitting in the light that came from the door, shook his head. "Arthur bought her from a miner," he said. "Someone from Marthastown. This man went broke in Ladron and sold his horse. The Grant bought her."

"I see," said Llano. "Good horses in Marthastown?"

"Some," Null answered. "Are you interested in horses, Mr. Land?"

"Some horses," Llano answered Null's query. "I like thoroughbreds."

"Thoroughbreds?" Null got up and his cigar tip glowed red, then died away.

Llano waited. Let Null make the conversation, let Null do the leading.

Out on the road, hoofs pounded. There was a-splashing in the fords of the little creeks. A rider, his horse running, appeared in the light that came from a window, going past the house toward the barn. Llano moved on the steps and Null, above him, was tense. Inside the house there was movement and Mrs. Stamp's voice, high and sharp. Llano got up from the steps.

As he moved toward the door he heard the sounds again, the muffled thudding of hoofs on the road. Null was beside him, had passed, and was opening the screen door of the house. Llano poised a moment listening. The screen slammed and again Mrs. Stamp's voice came, more shrill than before. What was this? Llano didn't know.

As he laid his hand on the screen to open it, horses again splashed in the ford, many horses now, and coming rapidly. As a voice hailed out of the night Llano relinquished his hold on the door handle and stepped back into the shadows. Men were riding up, stopping their horses before the porch, dismounting. Llano, turning, could see some of them in the light from the door. He started.

They made an odd sight—for gunny sacking had been used to mask men and horses. The men were covered, some with robes and bandanas tied about their heads, others with sharp pointed hoods that ran down into capes. There was one masked in a sheet. The horses likewise were disguised, only their ears and eyes showing through holes in their masking.

The screen door opened and Mrs. Stamps came out on the porch.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

The man in the sheet answered

that question. "We want Kent Null an' Dick Wadell," he said hoarsely. "We know they're here an' we want 'em."

"They ain't here . . ." began Gra'maw Stamps, fury and fright in her voice. "They ain't—"

"Don't lie," said the white-sheeted man sternly. "We know they're here. Bring 'em out if you don't want the place burnt!"

Gra'maw Stamps moved swiftly.

She reached inside the door, and when her hand reappeared, it clutched a shotgun.

The white-sheeted man, who had climbed the steps of the porch, moved as swiftly as the woman. He wrenched the shotgun from her hands before she could lift it, and held the weapon away. In the shadows, Llano could not but admire this old woman. She was protecting her guests and her property.

"Trot out Null an' Wadell," commanded the sheeted man. "Bring 'em out."

"What do you want with Null?" demanded the woman.

"We're goin' to take him out an' hang him to the nearest cottonwood," came the answer. "You know about Engra and Will Loman? You heard what he done to them?"

Gra'maw Stamps collected herself. "This is my place!" she announced. "It's a public house. I treat you all alike. Grant men an' Anti-Grant men. You know that. You know that I'll feed anybody that stops whether they got money or not. Like enough I've fed some of you. You go away! You ain't goin' to take anybody from my house an'—"

THERE was an interruption. Kent

Null stepped through the doorway and stood in the light, his face calm and impassive. He made an impressive

figure there, for all his slight body and scant height. Calmly he confronted them on the porch and in front of it and his voice was composed as he spoke.

"What do these men want, Mrs. Stamps?"

"They came for you an' Dick Wadell," answered Gra'maw Stamps. "They say they're goin' to take you out an' hang you. I been tellin' them—"

"Wadell is gone," said Null. "Word of your—ah—arrival preceded you, and Mr. Wadell has ridden away. As for me, I am here, but I do not know what I've done to warrant your hanging me."

"You know what you done, Null," growled the man in the white sheet. "You killed Will Loman an' his wife. Took their place away from 'em. We ain't goin' to waste time on you, Null. Are we, boys?"

There seemed a little uncertainty lying behind the fierceness of those last words. Perhaps there was a request for confirmation, for help. If so, that confirmation came. There was a concerted movement among the half dozen men on the porch and in front of the house, a surging forward. Null stood stolid, not moving. Mrs. Stamps reached out toward the white-sheeted man.

From the darkness beyond the porch Llano Land spoke coldly, three words—"Hold it, there!"

Llano had stepped away from the door when the horses came up, fading into the shadows. With Null's advent and the concentration of attention upon the Grant Lawyer he had slipped over the porch rail. Now he stood to the left and behind the men in front of and on the porch. His was the position of command and he held it.

His words caused sudden consternation among the hooded figures. Some turned and two started down the steps

Llano stopped that; there was utter finality in his voice as he spoke. "I'll kill the man that moves," he said.

The group on the porch froze. There was a slight relaxing of Kent Null's shoulders and his voice was easier when he said:

"Thank you, Mr. Land."

Llano could have cursed the man. He had hoped to remain unidentified. Forced to take a hand in these proceedings, he had hoped that his part would never be known. Now, by his words, Kent Null had identified him and, more than that, definitely tied him up with the Duro Grant. Null must have seen that, to, for he spoke again, making assurance doubly certain.

"That is Llano Land, gentlemen. Perhaps you have heard of him. If not, may I say that he is the man that brought law to Trinity and that he is considered a dead shot? What do you intend to do to these men, Mr. Land?"

Llano's voice was hoarse with anger when he answered. Null had betrayed his identity and now there was nothing to do but go on. "Line up!" he commanded. "Move easy. I'm Llano Land right enough, and I mean what I say."

There was movement on the porch. Disguised men, afraid of that cold-voiced man in the dark, shifted position until they formed a straggling line. Null spoke again.

"Shall I strip off their masks?" he asked.

"Let the masks alone!" ordered Llano harshly. "Gra'maw, you go down behind 'em. Take their guns. Get your shotgun. Stay behind 'em now!"

Mrs. Stamps was of the pioneer breed. She had been prepared to defend her guests; now she obeyed Llano's orders. Down the line she went, careful to keep behind the men

and in the clear. Some wore their weapons belted over their disguising robes, others did not—but from each man she took a heavy pistol, and at the end of the line she stopped.

"I got 'em all," said Gra'maw Stamps.

Out in the darkness, Llano Land addressed the masked ones.

"It's easy," he said, "to come riding in and run it over a woman an' a man that isn't armed. It's plenty easy, when you got yourselves covered so nobody can know you. There isn't a man amongst the bunch. You're a pack of whipped pups. Now you fork your horses and don't come back! Get out of here, an' keep riding!"

For an instant the men on the porch stood still. Then the man in the sheet moved toward the steps, and the others, breaking line, followed him. They went down the steps and not stopping, went to their horses. The white-sheeted man swung up. He wheeled his mount toward Llano Land.

"Land!" he said bitterly. "We'll remember you, Land. So the Grant has hired another killer, has it? Well, we won't forget. We'll—"

"Shut up!" Llano snapped contemptuously. "Ride your horses out of here and thank the Lord I'll let you. Get!"

As he spoke he stepped into the light. There was the blue steel of a weapon glinting in his hand and his face was hard and stern. More than the weapon, his face enforced the command.

The man in the white sheet wheeled his horse, moved out. One by one, the others followed him. When they were gone, Llano holstered the Smith & Wesson in the leather at his waistband and walked toward the steps.

"Thank you, Mr. Land," said Kent Null courteously. "I am indebted."

"You're indebted to Mrs. Stamps," said Llano. "It was her I acted for. As far as I'm concerned, Null, they could take you out and hang you high as heaven and I wouldn't move, but when the old lady takes to play, I'll step in."

"I see," Kent Null said slowly. "I see."

"It's good you do," answered Llano. "Let's go inside, Gra'maw."

"But they'll be back," began Gramaw Stamps. "Some of 'em' will have rifles on their saddles an' they'll get some more men an'—"

"They won't be back," Llano said contemptuously. "Not that breed. They'll ride a long ways and in the morning they'll have a tall tale to tell about what they should have done, and about the bunch of men that jumped 'em. I'm going to bed, Gra'maw. There won't be trouble tonight."

He pushed past the little old woman and the small man who stood beside her, and went to the door. At the door he stopped and looked around at Kent Null.

"I don't like you, Null," said Llano Land deliberately, "but I'll hand you this—you've got guts and you're smart. Good night, Gra'maw."

The screen door slammed and Llano Land was gone.

"Well. . ." said Gra'maw Stamps,

after a moment's pause. "Well, I do declare. Hadn't you better get your horse an' ride to Ladron, Mr. Null? Ain't you afraid they'll be back?"

Kent Null was standing, staring at the door. He spoke absently to Gra'maw Stamps. He said, musingly, "No, he is right about that. They won't come back. But I'm not so sure he is right about the rest. I'm not so sure that I am as clever as I thought."

CHAPTER VIII

Flaco's Deal

FLACO was a short, squat man. He had no other name than Flaco, no name that he answered to. In Trinity he had been accepted by the gambling fraternity but that acceptance had come by accident. He was not of the top flight by nature, and nature had her way with him. A sleeve holdout, a drink, a stuffed box, and in a final pinch, a double-barreled derringer, were his stock in trade. And when the cards went wrong, a knife or a piece of pipe in an alley served in lieu of skill and cold nerve.

Flaco had helped Rose Juell get away from Trinity. In Ladron, Flaco had lost track of Rose. The girl



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worked now for the Exchange Saloon. She was paid a weekly wage and given a percentage on the drinks she sold and on the money that came in over Flaco's faro table. Independent, she had shortly broken off her friendship with Flaco. Now, he was athirst to win her affection. Too dull-witted to know that this was impossible, he strove to regain the friendship he had lost. His want had grown into a consuming obsession, until all that Flaco could think of was the dark-haired girl.

Of course he had lucid intervals, times when his thoughts of Rose were submerged by other knavery, and during those periods Flaco was a good hand and an adjunct to Dick Wadell, who carried out Cameron's orders.

Flaco's partner was a native named Huerta. Huerta was tall where Flaco was short, and thin where Flaco was heavy set. Aside from that, the difference between them was that Flaco was afraid and Huerta smoked marijuana and feared nothing. The two stayed together, engaged in whatever form of profitable villainy they could find.

On the night of Loman's funeral, Flaco, accompanied by Huerta, went to the door of the long adobe house where Rose Juell stayed. Having freed herself from Flaco, Rose now held herself aloof, speaking to him only when she was at the Exchange . . . Selecting her door from the others that opened on the street, Flaco knocked.

"Who is it?" Rose asked.

"Flaco," answered the squat man. "Let me in, Rose."

Rose Juell was too tired to argue. She was, she believed, perfectly competent to handle Flaco. She knew that Flaco feared Cameron and she had more than an idea that Cameron was interested in her. Besides, she carried

a knife in her garter, a slim, vicious weapon, and she knew that she was smarter than the man outside. To avoid disturbance, Rose opened the door.

Flaco, with Huerta following him, sidled into the little room and looked around. On the wall there were two prints, both gaudy, both highly colored. There was a bed in the room, a table, two chairs and a little dresser. One corner was curtained off to make a wardrobe.

"I wanted to talk to you, Rose," Flaco remarked, seating himself, while Huerta squatted down against the wall.

"Go ahead," said the girl listlessly. There were circles under her dark eyes and her face showed tired lines.

"You talked to Land last night," continued Flaco. "Why is he over here, Rose?"

"He didn't tell me," Rose Juell lied, and looked at her questioner from beneath lowered lids.

Flaco disregarded that. "Is he goin' to work the same thing he did in Trinity?" he demanded.

Rose shrugged. "I don't know," she answered listlessly.

"Is he goin' to work for Cameron?" Flaco pushed his questions.

ROSE shook her head. "He didn't tell me what he was going to do," she said impatiently. "If you want to know about Llano Land why don't you ask him?"

"You could find out," said Flaco cunningly. "You could— Look here, Rose, Land's sweet on you, an' you know it."

"You'd better get out or more!" Rose spat the words at him. "Who do you think you are, Flaco? If Cameron found you bothering me, he'd—"

Flaco shrugged. "Cameron is goin' to want to know what you been foolin'

around that preacher for," he suggested. "Cameron ain't goin' to like that. You can't stall Cameron off like you stalled me, Rose."

Rose Juell got up from the chair beside the table. "I know that you don't like John Gunther, and that Cameron don't like him. That's because you're afraid of him. He can see through you and he can see through Cameron. He knows what you're going to do. If Paul Gunther ever says the word, you and Cameron and all of your dirty bunch will be on the road to hell—and I hope that you burn there!"

Flaco came out of his chair as though he had touched a hot coal. "I was good enough when you wanted me to help you get out of Trinity, an' now you try to spit on me. You think Cameron's sweet on you an' that he'll help you. You been talkin' things over with that preacher and you called Land over to a booth last night—"

The gambler stopped before the fierceness in Rose Juell's eyes.

"Damn it, Rose," he mumbled, "you ought to do somethin' for me. After all, I helped you out when you needed help. You could find out what Land's doin' over here, couldn't you? By the Lord, I got to know!"

A fire of anger was burning fiercely in Rose Juell. Her eyes flamed and under their heat Flaco retreated. "I'll tell you what Llano Land is here for," the girl said. "He's here to look for a man named Jack Ames, and for some horses Ames had. If you know—"

The girl stopped. Flaco had suddenly turned a dirty gray. His eyes were big with fright.

"You do know!" Rose accused him. "You know about Ames. Was he that yellow-haired cowboy that—"

She read her answer in Flaco's eyes. Her hand went to her mouth, stifling

the scream that formed in her throat.

"Damn you, Rose!" snarled Flaco.

"You killed him!" The girl's words were a whisper, her voice hoarse. "That's where you got that money. That's—"

The girl was pale. The anger had gone from her eyes and fear took its place. She had guessed too much and guessed correctly. Flaco's face told her that.

Beside the wall, Huerta, a marijuana cigarette between his lips, stirred uneasily, and Flaco took a step forward.

"Now, Rose . . ." said Flaco smoothly.

"What are you going to do?" The girl's voice lifted. "What . . . ? My God, Flaco!"

Flaco was edging forward. "I'm goin' to take yore pretty throat an' squeeze it till you can't talk. You'll tell Land I killed Ames, will you? You'll—"

"I didn't tell him anything," said Rose hoarsely. "I didn't . . . Flaco . . . !"

Flaco went on, apparently not heeding the interruption. "You'll tell Land that I took Ames' money? No— You'll never tell him anything!"

The man sprang suddenly, his short, thick arms reaching out for Rose. She screamed. As Flaco leaped, she shoved the table toward him, checking him momentarily—and as he recoiled from the table, she flung herself at the door, clawed it open.

Still screaming, she fled down Ladron's street.

FLACO, bouncing back from the table, tripped over Huerta and sprawled on the floor. He gathered himself, came up from the floor, and flinging a curse at Huerta, threw himself through the door. Rose was already some twenty yards away.

running. Heading toward the main street of the little town, Flaco jerked the derringer from his vest pocket, raised it . . . Then, some sanity returning to him, he lowered the gun. He stepped back through the door, reached down a hand and jerked Huerta to his feet.

"You fool!" raged Flaco. "Why didn't you stop her? Why didn't you help me? Do you know what she'll do now? She'll find Land, and if she hasn't already told him, she'll tell him now."

"What?" said Huerta stupidly.

Flaco cursed again and shoved Huerta. The tall Mexican reeled against the wall, struggled and regained his equilibrium. Flaco was already going out through the door—and as a dog follows his master, Huerta followed the gambler.

Rose Juell ran until she reached the corner and turned into the main thoroughfare of Ladron. She knew that Flaco would follow her—and she knew that if Flaco caught her, he would kill her. Already distraught and hysterical, this new danger tried her sanity. Earlier in the day she had dressed the body of Engra Loman, a trying enough experience. She had attended the funeral and had heard Paul Gunther speak. Then she had met Gwynne Rae and had thrown an accusation at that proud woman's face. Paul Gunther then had pacified Rose, had talked to her soothingly, speaking of peace and forgiveness, and still perturbed, she had at last gone to her room. Now this had happened, this thing that had unleashed all the evil in Flaco.

She knew that the gambler meant to kill her. Terror-stricken, she sought refuge—and the only haven that occurred to her was Llano Land.

He would protect her. When she

told him that Flaco and the man Huerta had ambushed Jack Ames, killed him and taken his money, he would act, at once. Llano Land would kill Flaco, Rose was sure—and in Flaco's death lay her only safety . . . Not that she reasoned these things, not that she coldly calculated upon Flaco's death. No, the girl turned instinctively toward Llano Land because he was strong and straight and a haven, and because she loved him.

She slowed her gait on the main street, hurrying but not running. Past curious men, past stores, past the Exchange Saloon, she made her way toward the Saint George Hotel—and in the lobby of the Saint George she found Nathan, and asked for Llano Land.

Nathan grunted. Llano Land, he said, was gone. Llano Land, Nathan implied, was a fool. He would be back, Nathan believed, because he had left a horse. But when Llano would return Nathan did not know.

Rose Juell turned, seemed to slump. The fire, the life, went out of her and only fear remained. For an instant she stood poised there in the lighted lobby of the Saint George. Then, with her head lowered, she went out of the door. Llano Land was gone and with him Rose Juell's last hope was gone. Flaco would kill her . . .

On the walk in front of the hotel she stood for a few moments, trying to collect her thoughts, trying to think of some way out. Somewhere near were Flaco and Huerta, and Rose knew that she must have a refuge from them. And there, standing in front of the Saint George, she caught at and grasped an idea, a feeble straw that might float her to safety. There was one man in Ladron to whom she could go, one man who was a tower of strength. If she could reach the

house of Paul Gunther she believed that she would be safe . . .

Gathering her skirts in her hand, she set out, fearful of the shadows, frightened by the men she passed who leered at her. Rose, who had never before known fear, now sought the safety Paul Gunther might afford her. Down the street she went, and near the end of the street, near the little church that stood isolated as though to avoid the contamination of the town, she came to an adobe building. She stopped there, and knocked on the door.

There was no answer and Rose knocked again, a frightened tattoo of trembling knuckles. Then the door swung open and Paul Gunther stood in the light. There was in his left hand a leather-bound Bible, and in his right, held firmly and cocked, was a heavy Colt. The light streamed out past him and struck Rose's face, reflected the terror in her eyes. She held out a hand and Paul Gunther, laying the pistol aside, stretched out his own strong right hand and caught the girl's.

"Come," he said in his deep, strong kindly voice. "Come. And whatever it is, it need frighten you no more."

Rose Juell caught her breath in a choked sob and allowed herself to be led into Paul Gunther's house . . .

In the Exchange Saloon, Flaco, with Huerta moving behind him like a somnambulist, sought Denver Capes. He caught the eye of the tawny-haired cow-boss, nodded toward a booth, and went into it. After a time Capes broke off his talk with the bartender and strolled over, slid into a seat in the booth.

"Well, Flaco," he growled, "what do you want?"

Flaco scarcely knew how to begin. His and Huerta's killing of Jack Ames

had been strictly a private affair, and Capes knew nothing of it, save only that Flaco had suddenly come into possession of money. Flaco shrugged, looked at Huerta for help, and receiving none from that source, turned again to Capes.

"I been havin' some trouble with Rose," he began awkwardly, "Looks like she's through with me."

Capes laughed. "She never was with you," he jeered. "Still, that'll be good new to Cameron."

Flaco disregarded the jibe. "I was tryin' to find out what that damn' Land is doin' over here," he continued. "Rose got him off in a booth last night, an' I thought mebbe she'd found out somethin', so I asked her."

"An' she told you to go to the devil," surmised Capes. "What do you care what Land's doin'? He'll be took care of."

"I found out what he was doin'," said Flaco. "He's over here lookin' for a man. There—"

"Lookin' for a man?" Capes lifted his eyebrows.

"Yeah," said Flaco. "A fellow named Ames. He had a bunch of horses. He sold 'em in Mathastown—"

Flaco stopped. He had said little too much.

"Sold 'em in Marthastown, did he?" Capes cocked up his eyebrows again. "An then what happened?"

There was no use stalling. Flaco had to go on. "Me an' Huerta rustled his roll," he completed suddenly.

Capes thought for a moment. "Ames," he mused. "He wouldn't be that fellow that Dick found out in an alley about a month ago, would he? The fellow that had a knife hole in his back?"

Flaco shrugged. "I—" he began.

"You killed him an' took his roll,"

CHAPTER IX

Rustled Beef

Capes stated flatly. "It looks like Land might make a real nice find of you, Flaco."

"Well?" said Flaco defiantly. "What about it? Is that any worse than stoppin' the stage, killin' the messenger an' takin' the pay load?"

A slow color flooded Capes' face. "It seems to me," he drawled, "that you know just a little too much, Flaco. Mebbe you been around here too long."

Flaco held up his hand. "Now, Denver," he placated, "I ain't never talked. I ain't never said a word. Land's lookin' for Ames, but you know he worked for Wells Fargo once. You know—"

"Well?" snarled Capes, with an impatient gesture.

Flaco set his feeble inventive powers to work. "Well," he said, "he's still workin' for 'em. This Ames business is just a stall. The express on the stage is all Wells-Fargo, ain't it? Wouldn't the Wells Fargo like to know what happened to that shipment? Pat Greybull had been raisin' the devil, you know. Now here comes Llano Land. . . ." Flaco let the words trail off, and cunningly stopped speaking in time.

Denver Capes' face darkened. "So Land's lookin' for the men that took the gold shipment," he mused. "When Dick gets back we'll see if Land can't find 'em."

Flaco breathed a sigh of relief, Llano Land's destiny, he felt, was now assured and in competent hands. Capes turned to Flaco again and there was a cruel smile on his face.

"Now, Flaco," he chided, "about that cash. You wouldn't go an' freeze too good friends like Dick an' me out of that deal, would you? How much did you get? I reckon we'll just split, fifty-fifty. . . ."

LLANO LAND did not see Kent Null in the morning. Despite his assurance to Mrs. Stamps and to the lawyer, Llano was far from confident when he left them. He went to the room that Mrs. Stamps had assigned him, but he did not undress. He sat down on the bed and waited. After a time he stretched out but still stayed awake, listening. He wondered who had brought the word of the night riders to Null and Wadell, and he wondered why Wadell had fled without the lawyer.

After midnight, when nothing more happened, Llano slept after a fashion. When dawn broke, he arose and went to the kitchen. Mrs. Stamps, looking much as though she had spent a sleepless night, had coffee on the stove and was making biscuits when Llano entered the room. She greeted him cheerfully, told him that there was a washbasin outside, and when he returned to the kitchen, his face shining and his hair combed, she poured him a cup of coffee and made him sit down at the table.

Llano sat there drinking his coffee and Gra'maw rolled out the biscuit dough and cut it, filling the greased pans. As she worked she talked and Llano learned a number of things concerning the Duro Grant. Gra'maw Stamps was grateful to Llano for his intervention. She thanked him for that and when Llano waved the thanks aside, she divulged information.

The Duro Grant, so said Mrs. Stamps, was spreading out. A boundary had recently been confirmed and now the Grant claimed land that for long periods had been held by small ranchmen and farmers. The Grant, or

so said Gra'maw, was offering two alternatives to those men who were on Grant Land—they could either pay a small rental to the Grant and thus be assured of protection, or they could vacate the property. The ranchmen and farmers themselves were substituting another alternative: They were sitting tight, refusing to pay rent and refusing to move.

"You see," explained Gra'maw, sliding pans into the hot oven, "they know if they pay rent they're admittin' that the Grant owns the land. They won't vacate. I don't blame 'em. All they got is in their little places. They're just stayin' still. The Grant gets deputies an' such out to move 'em an' they get together an' ride like they done last night. I expect I know every boy that was on my porch but I'm glad that you didn't make 'em take off their masks."

"There was no use of it," said Llano. "I didn't want to know who they were. All I wanted was for 'em to pull out."

Gra'maw Stamps looked cunningly at Llano. "I hung them guns out on the corral fence last night," she announced. "They was all gone this mornin'."

"H'm-m," Llano grunted.

"An' the horses were back," said Mrs. Stamps triumphantly.

"Were the horses gone?"

"That Dick Wadell," Gra'maw spoke contemptuously. "He was out in the barn when Len—when word come in that there was a bunch comin'. Wadell taken a horse an' run an' he left the corral gate open and the horses got loose. That's why Null couldn't get away. That Dick Waddell is a real skunk."

"H'm-m," said Llano again.

Mrs. Stamps sighed. "There's trouble in the country," she stated. "Even for a peaceful body like me. I've paid my rent to Grant an' I ain't complainin'. I guess they'll let me stay here as long as I want to. But when they start to shut down the mines..."

"What?" demanded Llano.

"The new boundary cuts right square through Marthastown," said Gra'maw. "Of course the Grant will try to grab the land. There's gold on it. They'll try to shut down the mines, an' then there will be trouble."

Llano let go a long whistle. "Trouble!" he echoed.

"Them miners," affirmed Mrs. Stamps, "won't just lie down an' take it. They'll fight. Then the Grant will fight back, an' my business will just be ruined."

Llano got up from his chair. "I'll bet you that the biscuits are done," he announced. "If I could have a couple of biscuits an' a little bacon



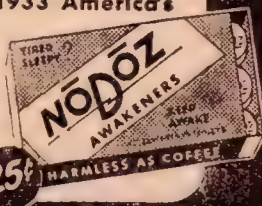
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I'd like to go along, Mrs. Stamps."

Gra'maw hustled to the stove. "I'll fix you a place in just a minute," she announced. "Set right back down an' I'll fix it for you."

When he had eaten breakfast and paid Mrs. Stamps, over her protests, Llano went out to the barn. Single-shot was in the corral and he nickered when he saw Llano. The horse had been fed, the barn-boy said, and Llano went into the corral, caught the gelding and, saddling, mounted. As he rode off toward the north he waved good-bye to Gra'maw Stamps, who stood on the porch and flapped a floursack dishtowel at her parting guest.

THE road to Marthastown led up a little valley. On either side mountains reared themselves, and a creek, muddied and rolled by the placer operations above, cut through the center of the valley. Llano crossed the creek a time or two and presently came to signs of mining operations. Here the gravel from the bed-rock had been gouged up by a dredge and having been washed clean, re-deposited in long windrows.

After a time Llano came to the dredge itself, a gaunt skeleton with bowels made of boiler plate, that growled and grunted and rumbled as the endless chain of buckets fed the maw. There were men at the dredge, on it and about it, and Llano rode over, quelling Singleshots' apprehension, and accosted the men.

Pat Greybull, so the dredge operators told Llano, was in town. At his office, they shouted; and Llano, thanking them, rode on.

At one time Marthastown had boasted eight thousand men. In those roaring days the town had had its man for breakfast every morning.

Now the production of gold had steadied and the first wild boom was over. Still, the town was populous, for there were men driving tunnels in the hills, men placering the creek, and prospectors drifting in and out.

Llano came at last to the building that housed Pat Greybull's office. A ragged boy pointed out the place and Llano, dismounting, tied Singleshots to the hitchrail and went in.

There was a railing inside the room, and two men behind it. One was a green-eye-shaded clerk. The other was short and gray and red faced. He turned as Llano entered and advanced to the railing.

"What can I do for you?"

"Mr. Greybull?" inquired Llano.

The short man nodded. Here was a direct, forthright man, Llano saw, a man who would answer yes or no and not equivocate. Llano went directly to his business.

"I'm here looking for a man named Jack Ames," he explained. "Do you know anything about him?"

"Who are you?" demanded Greybull.

"My name's Land," came the answer. "I'm a friend of Ames. Ames had some horses. . . ."

"I bought a horse from him," interrupted Greybull. "A bay gelding. He had seven horses and he disposed of them here. Sold them all. There are one or two around town now."

"How long ago did you buy the horse, Mr. Greybull?" asked Llano, "I'd like—"

The door behind Llano opened and Kent Null, with Dick Wadell behind him, entered the office. Null nodded pleasantly to Llano turned to Greybull.

Greybull's face was dark with color and there was an angry glint in his eyes.

"Are you busy, Mr. Greybull?" asked Null pleasantly. "If you are—"

"I'll come back," Llano said to the mine operator. He nodded to Null and turned on his heel.

Strolling down the street, Llano looked into the windows and stopped at one of the saloons. He was impatient. Null and Wadell had come in at the wrong time. There were questions that Llano wanted to ask Greybull, questions concerning Jack Ames and the men with whom Ames had associated.

Llano had killed time around Marthastown. He stopped in the stores, in a saloon or two where he took a modest drink, and sat on the steps of one of the stores while he watched a prospector loading two burros preparatory to a trip into the hills. The prospector's wealth of profanity was marvelous and Llano listened to that packing in awe.

While he loafed, Llano watched Greybull's office. Null and Wadell did not come out, and presently Llano rose and strolled down the street toward the restaurant, for it was almost noon.

Within a few moments of his arrival, Hamarick and Savoy rode up, and tied their horses. When they spoke to Llano he could tell that both had been drinking, for the whisky was heavy on their breaths.

Hamarick suggested a drink before the meal. Arch Savoy concurred in the suggestion, and Llano, falling in beside the two, accompanied them to a saloon two doors from the restaurant. The drink that Llano bought called for a round from Shorty Hamarick, and that called for a round from Arch Savoy. So, in place of one drink, there were three taken before the men left the bar and went out on the walk again.

As they emerged from the saloon, Kent Null and Dick Wadell rode toward them, coming from the direc-

tion of Greybull's office. Hamarick saw the riders, and without a word to Savoy or Llano, started out into the street. As Wadell and Null came abreast of him, the short man threw up his hand and the horses stopped.

"I been wantin' to see you, Null," said Hamarick, loud enough for any who might care to listen. "When you comin' out? Mat wants to talk to you."

Null's face flushed slightly. He looked at Wadell, and then at the short man on the ground. "I don't know what you mean," he said sharply. "Who are you? Who is Mat? I've never seen you before."

"Why you—" began Hamarick, but Dick Wadell, spurring his horse, struck the short man with the beast's shoulder. Shorty Hamarick went down into the dust of the street. Before he could scramble up, Null and Wadell had ridden on, and Arch Savoy, who had run out into the street, seized the small man and spoke sharply to him, but in so low a tone that Llano could not hear the words.

SAVOY brought Hamarick back to the sidewalk, and helped the little man brush the dust from his clothing. Neither Hamarick nor Savoy made any explanation of the incident, and Llano made no comment, although his mind was filled with questions. When Hamarick's clothing had been readjusted, the three went into the restaurant. There, Savoy and his companion sought the washroom. When the two rejoined Llano, both were silent, and Hamarick was considerably more sober than he had been.

The trio ate their meal and parted outside the restaurant, Savoy and Hamarick taking their horses and Llano walking on up the street toward Greybull's office. Before they separated, Arch Savoy had urged Llano

to come to the cabin, and Llano had promised an early visit.

In Greybull's office, the same eye-shaded clerk greeted Llano and told him that Greybull would be back in a few minutes. Llano waited, watching the door. Presently it opened and the mine operator came in. His face was flushed, and there was anger in his blue eyes. There was a paper in his hand and he came around the railing and straight toward Llano Land.

"You wanted to talk to me, did you?"

"Yes," Llano answered, wondering what was coming.

"Do you know what this is?" snapped Greybull, shaking the paper violently.

Llano shook his head.

"You lie!" Greybull's words were like a whiplash. "You work for the Duro Grant. Null told me about you. You rode in with him. Last night, you saved his life. You know what this is as well as I do. It's an injunction issued by a Territorial Court to make me stop operating on Grant property. Your damned deputy, Wadell, just served it." He drew in a furious breath. The paper waved again. "But you can take this and go back to Null and Cameron and tell them to go to hell. I won't stop operating! I'll make them eat this thing, hear me? Eat it!"

The stock little man, temper completely gone, crowded in against Llano, waving the paper, almost striking Llano in the face with it. Llano caught that jerking arm and pulled Greybull down.

"Listen," commanded Llano Land, "I don't work for the Grant or anybody else. If you can make Null eat that injunction it's all right with me—but don't try to feed it to me. When you calm down and get some sense

I'll come back and talk with you." He pushed Greybull aside and stalked to the door.

At the door, he turned and looked back. Greybull, almost insane with rage, was tearing the injunction into shreds and the eye-shaded clerk was coming around the corner of the railing. Llano shrugged and walked on out of the office.

Outside of Greybull's office, he untied Singleshot from the hitch-rail and rode down the valley. There was nothing in Marthastown to detain him, nothing further there for him to do. In his mind, Llano threw a curse at Kent Null. Null had very thoroughly stopped Llano, had very thoroughly identified Llano with the Duro Grant. From now on Llano was a man without friends. Without friends because he would not throw in with the Grant, and because in the eyes of those not of the Grant he was a Grant man.

His face darkened. There was only one place where Llano Land would be welcome, one place where he could be what he was and nothing else, and that was in the outlaw cabin of Mat McCarthy. Llano determined to go there.

CHAPTER X

Combine to Kill

KENT NULL was a smart man and an unscrupulous one. His mind worked smoothly in devious channels, and when he arrived at a conclusion he acted upon it. Null had arrived at two conclusions, one being that Llano Land was dangerous to his plans and to the future activity of the Duro Grant, the other that Mat McCarthy and his men had outlived their usefulness. Having arrived at

these conclusions he proceeded to act upon them.

When Null reached Ladron, riding back from Marthastown, it was already nine o'clock, though he had changed horses at Mrs. Stamps' inn. Wadell, restless and ill at ease, left the lawyer at Ladron House and went on to his own dwelling in the town. Null had said nothing of Wadell's cowardice at the inn. Wadell had run, scared to the marrow, and left Null to face the music. Null was alive through the intervention of Llano Land, and Wadell had learned of that from the barn boy at Mrs. Stamps'. But Null had made no comment, had shown no feeling, and Wadell was now more frightened of the little lawyer than he had been of the men who had come to hang them both.

Leaving his horse behind Ladron House to be looked after by a man from the stables, Null went through the rear entrance and directly to Cameron's office. Cameron was there, a bottle and glasses on the table, and his feet comfortably lifted to a chair. He looked up when Null came in, nodded, and gestured toward the bottle. Null poured a drink and seated himself on Cameron's desk.

"How did Greybull take your little present?" Cameron asked.

Null swung his leg and smiled in reminiscence. "He didn't like it," he answered. "I've never seen a man quite so angry as Pat Greybull. He swore that he would not quit operating, and that we could do what we pleased, but that the dredge would continue to run. Greybull, you know, is still in debt for the dredge. He lost a gold shipment that might have put him in the clear, and now I understand that the company he bought from is pushing him a little."

Cameron nodded, his dark face

intent. "But you had no trouble?" he asked.

"None at Marthastown," Null said. "Arthur, that man, Land, worries me."

Cameron's face darkened. "Why?" he demanded. "I've already decided what to do with Land."

"Kill him, I suppose," said Null. He shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Arthur. I'm in his debt."

Cameron straightened. "In Land's debt?" he asked incredulously. "How?"

"Because he saved my life," returned Null. "Last night, Wadell and I stopped at the Stamps' inn. We had visitors—several of the men from the upper country who rode down with the pleasant idea of hanging Wadell and me. Len Connors brought in the word of their coming, and Wadell took his horse and ran. He was considerate enough to turn all the horses out of the corral when he left, and I was left on foot. If Llano Land hadn't stepped in, I'd be dangling from a tree."

"And Land stepped in?" Apparently, Cameron couldn't believe that.

"He did. Most decisively. Mrs. Stamps and I were on the porch and our visitors had announced their intention, when Land came out of the dark and covered them." Null laughed mirthlessly. "I made sure," he continued, "that they learned his identity. That, somehow, did not please Mr. Land."

"Then your visitors think that Land is with the Grant?" asked Cameron.

"They do." Null nodded. "Llano Land has a reputation that we could use, Arthur."

THE manager of the Duro Grant leaned back in his chair and appeared to be engrossed in the thought. "You are smart, Kent," he said finally. "A clever man."

Null shrugged. "I have thought so," he answered. "Now, I'm not so sure. What about Wadell, Arthur?"

"Wadell," returned Cameron, slowly, "is a coward, but he is useful. I still have a little work for Dick Wadell."

"I see," said Null. "Our friend Gunther?"

"Perhaps." Cameron shrugged.

"There are some others that have outlived their usefulness," suggested Null. "Today in Marthastown, one of McCarthy's men stepped out into the street and stopped me. He said that McCarthy wanted to talk to you. Wadell knocked him down with his horse, and we rode on. Hasn't Mat McCarthy about finished his work, Arthur?"

Cameron nodded slowly. "I think so," he agreed. "McCarthy knows too much, Kent."

"Then?" said Null.

"Then we can eliminate McCarthy." There was a quiet savagery in Cameron's words.

Null mused a moment. "I believe," he said slowly, "that the chest which contained the gold shipment is still intact, Arthur. I believe that I could find it. Suppose that chest were to be found at McCarthy's cabin? Suppose a posse of Grant riders were to make that discovery and that McCarthy and his men were to resist that posse? The chest, of course, would be restored to the Wells-Fargo and no doubt Greybull might feel kindly toward the Grant."

"Just the chest, of course." Cameron caught the suggestion, Null nodded. "That would do very well," he said.

There was silence between the two for a moment, and Cameron reached for his glass and the bottle. When he had taken another drink, he spoke again:

"Metcalf, the fat-headed fool," he

drawled, "has ridden away filled with the idea that Gwynne's property is in danger. If we have trouble at Marthastown, we can count on Metcalf stepping in."

Null smiled. "The power of the government," he murmured. "Love is a wonderful thing, Arthur. It could make Wayne Metcalf forget his position and his orders. Still, I suppose that aiding officers of the territory in their duty and keeping the peace might fall under his jurisdiction."

Cameron shrugged. "If not, we can't be worried," he said. "At any event Gwynne is seeing a good deal of Metcalf."

"Too much?" Null lifted his eyebrow's.

"Too much," said Cameron heavily.

"Then I take it that you do not prosper there," commented Null.

"I can wait," Cameron answered. "After all, when this thing is done and the Grant is cleared, will be time enough for me."

There was silence for a moment as both men mused. Null smiled quizzically. "Do you prosper elsewhere, Arthur?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" snapped Cameron.

"Rose—" There was a glint of amusement in Null's eyes. "After all, Arthur, you are paying her a sum for staying at the Exchange Saloon. You have freed her from Flaco, and it would seem that she ought to be grateful."

Cameron flushed darkly. "She will be," he promised.

"But as yet she isn't. I see." Null laughed. "Have you thought what effect that might have on the future, Arthur? Suppose that Gwynne's brother, Donald, were to discover your little flirtations. Suppose—"

"That fool!" snapped Cameron.

"Give him a horse, and he thinks of nothing else. He should have been a farrier. There's no danger from him!"

Both men laughed, and Null helped himself to the liquor. "The whole Grant," he said. "Miles of land. Grazing for sheep and cattle, gold in the hills, coal to mine when the railroads come, and Arthur Cameron the Lord of the Manor."

"And Kent Null with his nest feathered and a finger in every pie," rejoined Cameron quickly. "You don't trust me, Arthur," he said.

"No," agreed Cameron, "but you can be bought."

Again there was silence between the two, each man immersed in his own thoughts. Then Null spoke. "We have yet to account for two men," he said. "There is John Gunther and Llano Land."

Cameron looked up quickly. "Gunther, yes," he said. "The man is a power. He talks too much, and people listen to him. We have Gunther to account for, and I intend to take care of that matter, but what about Llano Land? What can he do?"

"Llano Land," said Null slowly, "can kill you and me and Wadell Capes. He, my friend Arthur, holds our plans at the end of his trigger finger. I am afraid of him."

"Why then," Cameron said heavily, "we must account of Llano Land, too."

Null laughed ruefully. "You forget," he said, "that he saved my life. A poor thing, Arthur, my life, but somehow I value it."

Silence again. Then Cameron spoke. "But not as much, I hope, as you value some other things, Kent?"

"No," agreed Kent Null, "not so much as I value other things, Arthur." Rising from the desk, he nodded to Cameron, and turned toward the door. "A night's sleep won't hurt me," he said, and then laughing ruefully, "It was little sleep I got last night. Good night, Arthur."

Cameron answered, "Good night," and Null went out, leaving the manager of the Duro Grant to help himself again to the whisky, and stare reflectively at the doorway.

CAMERON sipped his drink, sipped again and then, cradling the glass in his hand, spoke half aloud. "So McCarthy knows too much?" he husked. And then, after a pause, "But not so much as Kent Null!"

For a time, Cameron sat quiet, then he took his hat from the pair of antlers on the wall and walked to the door. At the door, he paused, lifted a revolver from its holster in his hip

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pocket, and examining the nickel-plated .38 in the light, restored it to its resting place. So, his toilet made, Arthur Cameron went out into the night.

Leaving Ladron House, he strolled toward the town, where there was still activity. At the cross street below the Exchange Saloon, he turned, went a few doors further and then knocked. A voice from within the building demanded his identity, and when he had answered, the door swung open.

Dick Wadell was sitting on a bed at the side of the room. Cameron entered, and Denver Capes closed the door and followed Cameron into the room. Cameron pushed out a chair, sat down on it so that he faced Wadell, and Capes walked over and sat down beside his partner.

"So you got back?" said Cameron to Wadell.

Wadell nodded. "Come pretty near not makin' it," he answered. "There was a bunch jumped Nell an' me at Gra'maw Stamps' place. We like to not got away."

"I heard about that," commented Cameron dryly. "Null came near not getting away, but Dick Wadell looked after his own bacon, all right."

Wadell flushed, and was about to speak, but Cameron forestalled that. "You served that paper," he said. "How did Greybull take it?"

"Pretty hot," said Wadell.

Cameron nodded. "Things are coming to a head now," he announced. "It won't be long. Greybull and the Marthastown men won't take that injunction lying down. They'll fight. Then we'll have the soldiers out and get things settled the way we want them settled. There is only one thing that bothers me now and that is McCarthy. He knows too much."

"Well?" said Wadell.

"What did you do with the Wells-Fargo chest?" asked Cameron. "Did you break it up or burn it?"

Wadell shook his head. Capes, grinning, reached under the bed upon which he sat, and pulled out a heavy iron-bound box.

"Here she is," he announced.

"I want that chest planted in McCarthy's cabin," ordered Cameron. "Then I want you to take a bunch out there, Wadell, and search the place. You'll find the chest and McCarthy will have that stage robbery to account for."

"What good will that do?" asked Wadell. "It'll make McCarthy sore, an' he'll spill his guts about what he's been doin'. He—"

"When you bring McCarthy and his men in, they won't be talking," Cameron said significantly. "The chest is to be planted out there so that Greybull won't have so much to think about."

"Oh," grunted Wadell, "that way, huh?"

"That way," agreed Cameron. For a moment the three men watched each other in waiting silence.

"We was just talkin' here, Dick an' me, about Gunther," said Capes, after the pause. "Rose quit Flaco, an' is stayin' in Gunther's house. She an' Flaco had it out last night."

"So she's at Gunther's?" Cameron turned to the Grant cow-boss.

"Yeah." Capes nodded. "Flaco's scared of Lano Land."

"I'd think he would be," said Cameron drily. "Flaco had one experience with Land, and that ought to be enough."

"Flaco wants me an' Wadell to take care of Land," announced Capes, his voice matter-of-fact.

"I see," said Cameron. "Are you going to do it?"

"We thought we might," Capes answered casually.

"Gunther was out at Spears' place today," Wadell announced. "He was talkin' out there. Spears was about in the notion of payin' rent to the Grant an' Gunther talked him out of it."

"Yeah," agreed Capes, "I was out there this afternoon. An' all that Ortega bunch at the San Carolos Mesa have been listenin' to Gunther. I had ol' Ramon Ortega talked into comin' with the Grant, an' Gunther went out there an' stopped it."

"Gunther talks too much," Cameron said decisively. "Gunther is about through."

"If somethin' happened to Gunther, we'd have the whole world to fight," warned Wadell. "These Mexicans think Gunther is just God."

Cameron scowled. He was thinking, studying out a situation.

"Suppose," he began slowly, "that Gunther was killed an' it was blamed on somebody besides the Grant. Then what?"

"Then half the Mexicans that are holdin' out an' some of the others, too, would be with us," said Capes quickly.

"And Rose—" Cameron didn't finish the sentence.

"Rose would have to get to somebody that would keep Flaco off her," Capes was blunt. "Flaco's afraid that she's goin' to talk to Land an' mebbe tell him too much."

"Mebbe—" began Wadell.

"Maybe what?" demanded Cameron.

"Mebbe she'd come to you," finished Wadell in a burst of daring.

The Grant manager didn't speak for some time; when he did, his words were slow. "If it could be made to look as if Land killed Gunther," he said, "and if the Grant men took Land

and killed him for it, there might be some difficulties settled and it might be worth something to the men that arranged it."

Wadell and Capes exchanged a look. "We're goin' to be busy with that McCarthy thing," said Wadell slowly,



Paul Gunther

"but Flaco hates Gunther's guts."

Cameron got up from his chair. "How many men have you got now, Capes?" he asked.

"Twenty, more or less," answered Capes, "an' then there's Flaco an' Huerta. Twenty-four, countin' them an' Dick an' me."

Cameron nodded. "That ought to be enough," he said. "And then of course"—he smiled wryly—"we can depend on the soldiers."

"When do we start?" asked Wadell bluntly.

"Why," Cameron asked, "what's the matter with now? Good night!"

He walked to the door, turned and surveyed the two for a moment, and then the door closed behind him.

Left alone, Dick Wadell and Denver Capes stared at each other.

"I don't like it," Wadell said suddenly. "Here's McCarthy that knows too much, an' McCarthy's on his way out. Here's Gunther that talks, an' Gunther's leavin'. Where does that put you an' me, Denver?"

Denver Capes shrugged. "I've got mine in the bank at Trinity," he answered. "Some day pretty soon Denver Capes is just goin' to fade out of the picture, an' he ain't comin' back."

Wadell nodded. "An' when you go one way, I'm goin' the other," he announced. "We ought to collect heavy for this, Denver."

"Don't fret," said Denver Capes. "We will. Now, how we goin' to plant Gunther on Land?"

CHAPTER XI

Owlhoot Cabin

LLANO LAND was a good hour behind Kent Null and Dick Wadell leaving Marthastown. He took the trail south out of the

place, passed the sluices and the dredge, and within three hours was at the Stamps' Inn. Having left Marthastown shortly after one o'clock he still had daylight, and Singleshot, although he had covered country, was not tired; so Llano rode on. He let the big horse take his time, knowing that at the end of the ride there would be feed and rest for the horse and a fresh mount for himself.

Down the Ladron canyon darkness overtook Llano, but he continued his ride, sure that Singleshot would keep the trail, and that Ladron lay at the end of the road. It was late when he sighted the lights of the town, and riding down past the dark bulk of Ladron House, came to the Saint George. Turning Singleshot over to the boy at the stable, Llano went into the hotel. There was no one in the lobby of the place and so, taking his room key from a rack behind the desk, Llano went to his room, undressed and went to bed.

He awakened early, dressed and went to breakfast. When he had finished the meal and was crossing the lobby, Leige Nathan accosted him.

"Rose Juell was in here early last evenin'," said the hotel proprietor. "Said she wanted to see you."

"Did Rose say what she wanted?" Llano asked.

Nathan shook his head, and Llano went on out. The bartender at the Exchange had no word of Rose Juell. She had not been in the night before, and Flaco had not attended his game. The bartender didn't know where either of them was, but he was able to tell Llano where Rose lived. Accordingly Llano left the saloon and went on down the street, turned off, and presently reached the adobe where Rose had kept her room. A gaunt Mexican was lounging in front of

the place, and Llano asked questions.

Huerta shrugged. "No ista aqui," he answered, and when Llano persisted Huerta shrugged again and said, "Quien sabe?"

There was nothing to be gained from this lout, Llano saw. Further discreet inquiries along the street failed to disclose Rose Juell's whereabouts, and finally Llano gave up the search and went back to the Saint George. There he ordered Jigger saddled, and when the buckskin horse with the black cross over his shoulders was brought around, Llano mounted.

He headed east out of Ladron with the intention of visiting Mat McCarthy. McCarthy's cabin was west and north, but Llano had no intention of advertising his purpose.

When he cleared Ladron and the town was well behind, he turned Jigger north, and let the horse out. Jigger struck a springy canter, and broke from that into a lope, fighting his head to be allowed to run. Llano held him in.

On north he went. Then, some three miles from the town he turned back toward the west. There was a canyon entering the Ladrones here, and that canyon's divide dropped down into Rincon Canyon.

Llano passed a ranch in the canyon, a small place where a tow-headed boy peered curiously at the strange rider and then ran in to the cabin. The young rider worked on up the trail that extended above the ranch, topped the divide and so rode down into the Rincon, through the small parks and flats, and at length came to the park bordered by the aspens. It was noon.

There was no smoke from McCarthy's cabin and no sign of life about the place. The surly Jigger tossed his head and fretted, but the gate in the pole fence was down and

Llano rode through, not stopping to replace the bars. McCarthy and his men had left them down and Llano would leave them so. Outside the cabin, he dismounted and walked toward the open door. Evidently McCarthy had left in a hurry. Llano grinned a little. There was more than one reason why McCarthy might leave in a hurry. Llano wondered if he had made this trip in vain, if McCarthy was gone on some foray, or if the men who used the cabin were now in Texas or in Colorado, "speculating," as Mat said, in cattle.

There was one step up to the cabin door. A log, its surface hewn to some semblance of flatness, formed that step. Llano set foot upon it. A sound came from inside the cabin, a thud. Perhaps a pack, rat moving and disturbing supplies left there. Llano lifted his other foot ready to set it on the door-sill. There was a gasp inside the cabin, a gun roared, and hot lead brushed Llano's cheek.

Llano, swinging back, his back against the cabin wall, had a gun in his hand. Jigger, away from the doorway, stood with head high and ears pricked forward. Inside the cabin, there was silence.

Was that shot a mistake? Llano did not know. It might be that one of Mat McCarthy's men was inside, perhaps the man that Llano had not met on his first visit to the place. Llano had come unannounced, deceived by the apparent lack of life about the place. Now, he must give his identity.

"I am Llano Land," he said evenly, loud enough so that the man inside must hear. "I've come to see Mat."

Whirling away from the door, as he spoke, Llano Land heard a gun bellow again—heard the sharp thunk of lead into the logs which a moment before

he had pressed against. Then the Smith & Wesson in his own hand kicked back sharply—once and then again—and from the further end of the cabin a man toppled forward into the sod, his hat falling clear to expose his blond hair. . . . For a moment, Llano stood poised. Then, slowly, gun held ready, he walked forward and looked down.

"Capes," said Lano and softly. "Denver Capes. And what are you doing here?"

Denver Capes made no answer. There was an account in the bank at Trinity that would never be withdrawn.

WHEN he had stood for a moment looking down at the man he had killed, Llano walked back to the door. He hesitated there fractionally, and then went into the cabin. A window, open and with a bench below it, showed how Capes had left the cabin. There were beds neatly made on the bunks, there were dishes, clean and piled on the table. The coffee pot was still warm on the stove where Llano left it. Out in the center of the room was a box, metal bound and heavy. The stencil on the box read Well-Fargo Express Company. Llano opened the box and looked at the empty interior. After that brief inspection, he walked out. On the step he stopped and then sat down. His hands produced papers and tobacco. Llano Land rolled a cigarette and glanced at the blond hair of the man at the end of the cabin. . . .

That cigarette was gone, and so were two others, when the jay in the aspens announced callers. The bird shrieked harshly, and Jigger lifted his head from his grazing. Llano stood up, his hand resting on his belt buckle. A horseman came through the

grove—it was Mat McCarthy. After McCarthy came others. Mat McCarthy dismounted, his blue eyes keen and questioning.

"What happened, Llano?"

Llano gesticulated with his left hand. "I'd come to see you, Mat," he said, his voice soft. "Capes was here when I came in. It seemed like he didn't want me."

Mat McCarthy's blue eyes were wide and round. Behind McCarthy, Arch and Virge Savoy were dismounting. Shorty Hamarick still sat his saddle.

"Capes!" said McCarthy incredulously. "What would he be doin' here?"

"I don't know, Mat." Llano took his right hand from his belt buckle. "There's an empty Wells-Fargo strong-box inside. Mebbe—"

But Mat McCarthy, with an oath, had crowded past Llano, and was inside the cabin door. The Savoy twins had come forward, and Llano stood aside to let them enter. Shorty Hamarick was dismounting.

McCarthy came back out of the cabin. There was anger on his fat face, anger and something else—fear. "Capes!" snarled Mat McCarthy. "He brought that box out! He was trying to plant that stage robbery on us. Damn his black heart. Damn him!"

"Capes?" said Llano Land gently. "Or the Duro Grant? Which, Mat?"

The big outlaw drew himself together with an effort. He looked at Llano. "The Grant, I reckon," McCarthy answered evenly. "I guess the Grant figures us no use any more."

Llano waited. McCarthy looked at the gray-eyed man a long moment, a hard penetrating look. When he spoke, it was to voice thanks. "I'm obliged, Llano," he said. "You got here about right. An' now we got to get out of

here. There'll be a posse along lookin' for this box unless I'm mistaken. Come on, boys!"

"Wait," commanded Llano. "What's all this about, Mat?"

McCarthy spoke hurriedly. "We moved the corner stone for the Grant, Llano. They paid us to do it, an' they let us alone, here. Now somebody has decided that we know too much. We got to go. Don't you see, Lano?"

Llano Land nodded. "But what about—" He jerked his thumb toward where Capes lay.

McCarthy looked in that direction. "That's so," said Mat McCarthy. "We got to plan this. Arch, you get the horses. Virge, you an' Shorty get inside an' start packin' up. We'll head for the Junta holdup. I'll be with you in a minute." He turned to Llano.

"An' you killed the Grant cow-boss," he said. "I reckon you'll come with us, Llano."

THERE was nothing else for Llano to do. He recognized the correctness of Mat's reasoning, and he knew that Mat and his men must be gone from the cabin and gone quickly. Denver Capes had come alone and in advance to plant that Wells-Fargo strong-box. There would be a posse on Capes' heels, a posse riding not far behind him. Llano joined the feverish activity in the cabin.

Arch Savoy brought in horses from the little trap behind the cabin. Bedding was rolled hurriedly and thrown over horses' backs to be lashed there. Cooking pots and pans, tin plates, cups, knives and forks, were tossed hurriedly into a gunny sack. Within ten minutes after the arrival of Mat McCarthy the inside of the little cabin was gutted of its portable contents. Then Virge Savoy, without a word, lifted the body of Denver Capes and

carried it into the cabin. Shorty Hamarick, as though working out a prearranged plan, emptied kerosene from a two-gallon jug over the puncheon floor and threw down a lighted match. A puddle of kerosene caught and blazed.

Mat McCarthy, with a final look at the place, backed out the door. "Let's go," he ordered.

The men mounted, McCarthy led the way, not taking a path through the aspens but riding on west from the cabin, following a little trail that seemed to end in the rock wall of the rincon. Behind Mat came the others, and back in the little cabin smoke seeped from the log walls.

At the rincon wall, Mat reined in sharply. There were two horses there, one carrying a stock saddle, the other with pack equipment in place. No need to say whose horses these were. Their owner lay in the cabin, flames licking around his inert head. Mat McCarthy dismounted, untied the animals, and fastening the lead rope of the pack animal to the tail of the saddle horse, mounted again and went on, leading his charges. Behind McCarthy the others, too, resumed their progress.

There was a narrow cleft in the rock wall of the rincon. It sloped up steeply. McCarthy's horse, scrambling for footing, entered the cleft and climbed. One by one the other riders and the loaded horses took that trail. Up they went, and come out on a bench. A steep slope arose from that bench, loose rock rolled, the horses clattered over stones and paused before each foot was set down. Still they went up that impassable trail, belying it, making it passable, and at the top with the wall of the rincon dropping off below them, they stopped to breathe.

It was there, sheltered by pines, that Mat McCarthy peered back toward the place from whence they had come.

"Look!" he exclaimed.

There below them in the rincon, the cabin flamed, a funeral pyre. As they watched, a little group of horsemen, a dozen of them, rode through the aspens, halted and then came on toward the cabin at a run. They saw the horsemen slide their horses to stops, saw a man fling himself from the saddle and run to the cabin, saw him recoil from the fierce heat.

And then Mat McCarthy spoke again. "Come on," he ordered. "They found what they was lookin' for, damn 'em! Come on, boys!"

Again they rode, and now McCarthy bent toward the north. Along ridges where bare stones rattled beneath shod hoofs, they took their way. Up and up, while the brown slope of Copper Mountain towered above them and the pines and aspens gave way to aspens alone, and then to the gnarled little cedars that cling to the timberline. Bare rock and grass now, and then they were dropping down and down and down until the pines grew thick once more. Moss was soft beneath the shod feet of the horses. Water splashed, and the moss gave way to tall grass—and then, beyond the spongy ground, a little trickle of water formed.

Mat McCarthy turned. He grinned at Llano until his teeth showed like the fangs of a snarling dog. "Here—" he gestured. "We stop here."

Back of Llano, Arch Savoy growled, "How will Bill find us?"

McCarthy's look was one of flashing scorn. "Bill will come to the cabin an' on from there," he answered. "Bill showed us this place. Remember?"

Arch Savoy nodded, and his twin

spoke for the first time. "Let the Grant try to find us," said Virge Savoy. "Let em try!"

Llano Land looked at the hard set faces about him. "Why," drawled Llano, "the Grant may try, Savoy, but it looks to me like it would be up to you to find the Grant." They smiled.

"We'll find the Grant," vowed Shorty Hamarick. "We'll find the Grant, Land, an' when we do, they'll know it!"

CHAPTER XII

Servant of the Lord

PAUL GUNTHER served his Lord in two capacities: First, as a minister of the gospel, carrying the Word to the outlying communities about Ladron and to Ladron itself; and second, as a social reformer. In a later day Paul Gunther would have been an evangelist, in an earlier day, a prophet. A big man, Gunther, and strong, he carried his load with a high head. A part of his duty was to visit Marthastown, and this he did, driving out from Ladron weekly. At Marthastown he preached to a few faithful men and women and then went on to Cottonwood and to Daylight, other small mining communities.

Besides preaching the gospel, Paul Gunther preached the brotherhood of man—and practised it. The night was not too cold or the day too hot to find Paul Gunther in the saddle when he was called. He had fought diphtheria, that dread disease of the outlands, and smallpox; he had set broken bones and christened children and comforted those left behind when a loved one died. Paul Gunther was worshipped and looked up to and believed by many, and by a few he was cursed and watched as a danger-

ous man—a man who thought too much and talked too much.

At noon on the day when Llano Land left Ladron enroute for Mat McCarthy's, Paul Gunther prepared to leave for Marthastown. His preparations were complicated by the presence of Rose Juell in his home. It had been simple enough when he had only Maria, his Mexican housekeeper, but now he felt responsible for this strange dark beautiful woman who was troubled and to whom he had given refuge. Rose Juell was frightened. Paul Gunther knew, and he knew, too, that there was something besides fright preying upon her mind.

When the simple noonday meal had been eaten, the minister arose from his table and spoke to Maria. "I am going to Marthastown today," he announced. "I will be back by Saturday."

Maria nodded as one long accustomed to such statements, but Rose Juell sprang up from her chair, her face troubled. "Marthastown!" she exclaimed.

Gunther nodded. "I go each week," he said gently.

"But you can't—" began Rose. And then, realizing the futility of what she had been about to say, "Can't you take me with you?"

Gunther smiled, and shook his head. "No," he answered. "I can't possibly do that."

Rose stood beside the table. She knew that Gunther could not take her along, and she was afraid to be left in Ladron alone.

"Something is troubling you," said Paul Gunther.

Maria had gone out of the room. Rose came around the table. She stopped before the preacher. "You've been kind to me," she said. "And

how have I paid you? By bringing my troubles here!"

"That is all the payment I ask." Gunther's smile illuminated his face. "I have not pried, Rose, but if you could tell me—"

Rose, sat down in a chair beside the table and clasped her hands on the red-and-white oilcloth cover. "I've got to tell you," she said. "I've got to talk to somebody!"

Paul Gunther sat down.

There was silence between the two for a moment, and then Rose spoke. "I love a man," she began, her voice low. "I love him, and he doesn't know that I'm alive. I'd go to hell for him! Do you hear—to hell!"

Paul Gunther's fingers reached out and covered the tightly clasped hands of the girl. Under the pressure of his friendly grip, Rose regained a measure of her composure. She smiled tremulously.

"This man—" said Gunther gravely. "What are you to him, Rose?"

"Nothing," answered the girl. "I've had my own way to make ever since I can remember. I've danced and sold drinks on percentage and sung in saloons. But I've never loved a man before. And this man won't look at me!"

"And the man—" insisted Gunther.

"Llano Land," said Rose. "I've told you that he doesn't know I'm alive. The last time I talked to him, I told him I hated him!"

Gunther smiled wisely. "I think," he said gently, "that you must wait. If you love Land you sacrifice for him. Eventually he must know of it."

The words seemed to comfort the girl. She was silent, and Gunther spoke again. "Why did you come to me?"

"Because I was afraid," the woman answered. "I've taken care of myself

for a long time, but I never was afraid like I am now."

"And you are afraid—"

"Of Flaco," said Rose. "He came to my room. He meant to kill me. I got away and came here."

"You should have gone to the officers," said Gunther.

"To Dick Wadell?" Rose laughed, her voice a little wild. "Don't you know what Dick Wadell is? Why, Flaco and Huerta work for Dick Wadell. They do what he tells them."

Again Gunther considered, frowning darkly. Then he arose. "I must go," he announced. "I drive to Mrs. Stamps' tonight. I will think of what you have told me, Rose, and when I come back I will know what is best to do. Stay close and do not leave the house."

The girl also arose as Gunther did. She studied his strong dark face earnestly. "I'll stay here," she answered. "But you won't tell—you won't say anything to Llano?"

Gunther shook his head. "I will not speak to him," he promised.

Rose was content with that, and Gunther, smiling at her, turned and walked from the room. Within a few minutes Rose heard the buckboard pull away from the house.

THE buckboard rattled up Ladron's street, and Paul Gunther looked to right and left, nodding to women and men in doorways, smiling at children playing in the street. Beyond Ladron House, he turned the team to the right and so began the ascent of Ladron Canyon, and as the buckboard followed the winding of the canyon road, two men saddled horses in Ladron—Flaco, the gambler, and his partner, Huerta.

Paul Gunther drove his team not rapidly but steadily. The two ponies

hitched to the buckboard were gentle. They were a gift of Juan Villareal, the head of the thirty families of Villareals, who, though a devout Catholic, still liked and respected "Padre Gunther." As he drove, Paul Gunther meditated upon the things that Rose Juell had told him, and from those thoughts his mind turned to others—thoughts of the Duro Grant. . . .

He was not aware of the passing of time nor the winding and twisting of the canyon road. The horses forded the creek without his guidance, climbed the hills, indeed once paused to breathe before they progressed further; all this Paul Gunther did not see or note. He had reached the little stream at the head of the canyon, the creek called "Segundo," before he emerged from his preoccupation. He lifted his eyes then only because two men rode down the little trail that ran beside the creek, and hailed him. Paul Gunther stopped his team.

He recognized these two men, and knew for what they had come. There was no question in Paul Gunther's mind as to the mission of these two, and for a moment he was afraid. For a gasped instant he thought of escape, of lashing the gentle horses and making the wheels of the buckboard fly. For a second, Paul Gunther thought of those things, and then he resigned them. The bay ponies stopped.

Flaco and Huerta rode up beside the buckboard. There was a grin on Huerta's thin face, and a cigarette dangled between his lips. Paul Gunther sniffed a faint odor foreign to the clean smell of the pines, foreign even to the smell of burning tobacco.

Flaco did not smile; Flaco was grimly in earnest. He wheeled his horse abreast of the buckboard's seat.

"Where is Rose?" he demanded.

All the way up the canyon and over the hills that paralleled it, the gambler had been nerving himself for the thing he was to do. He had drunk not once but many times from the bottle in his saddle pocket. He had steeled himself, and finally he had hit upon an excuse, a plausible reason for the thing he did. Paul Gunther had stolen Rose Juell—had taken Flaco's woman. Paul Gunther deserved to die.

"She is safe," answered the minister, evenly. "What do you wish, my friends?"

"Get out of the buggy!" ground Flaco.

Huerta was already on the ground. Paul Gunther hesitated. Life was a sweet thing and there was still work to do. If Flaco dismounted, if Flaco quit his horse, there was a chance for escape. But Flaco seemed to read the mind of the man on the buckboard seat. With an oath he jerked out a gun, a heavy Colt, and covered Gunther. "Get out!" he rasped.

Gunther wrapped the lines carefully about the whip-socket, securing them there. He stepped over the wheel and from the wheel to the ground, to face Flaco and Huerta. The Mexican had taken a knife from his waistband. It was the sight of that knife that unnerved Paul Gunther, that shook his stern resolution.

Gunther was a big man, tall and strong, with a boyhood of hard farm work behind him and a manhood of manual labor. He had the strength to fight back. So, his resolution broken, he whirled upon Huerta. A big hand struck out and the Mexican reeled back.

Now the grin was gone from Huerta's face. He came in snarling, spitting his venom like a Gila monster,

and Paul Gunther met him. They grappled. A part of Huerta's shirt ripped free and flapped with the struggle, and something fell unnoticed from the pocket of that flapping shirt. The bodies surged back and forth, two strong men at grips, and Gunther the stronger. Then Flaco, who had slipped from his saddle, struck in with his heavy Colt, beating down savagely. The bay ponies, frightened, snatched the buckboard away, the wheels spinning on the road, while Paul Gunther staggered back. Huerta, knife raised, leaped forward.

The knife was dull silver when it came down. It was darker when Huerta raised it again, and plunged it down once more. Up and down! Up and down!

Then Flaco snapped, "*Bastante!*" and caught the descending arm. From the road came a long call:

"Ho! Preacher!"

A horse pounded, Huerta, jerked back to his senses, seized the bridle reins of his mount in bloody hand and Flaco swung himself into his saddle. Sharp stones rattled along the side of Segundo Creek. The willows waved and a trout in a pool fled away to hide under a rock, and all was still until the long call came again: "Preacher! Preacher!"

But the man who had been called Paul Gunther did not answer.

DALE FALLIEN, long and tall and tired, with the dust of travel upon him, rode around the bend above Segundo Creek and reined in his horse.

Fallien did not dismount immediately. His eyes had seen death in many forms, and now they stared at arms reaching out. The back of his coat was slit to ribbons, and a bright it again. Paul Gunther lay with his

trickle of red ran down over a stone to form a pool.

"Preacher—" said Dale Fallien, softly.

Then he dismounted. Holding his horse by one rein, he bent over the man on the ground. For an instant he stooped, then he jerked erect again, and his blue eyes, bright now, were searching the ground and the surroundings. One thing he saw. Fallien took a long step and picked up a tobacco sack, a limp oblong of muslin, partly filled. This he put into his pocket.

There was nothing else to see, nothing more, and Fallien mounted his horse and rode away. When he returned, he was driving Paul Gunther's buckboard, with his own horse following behind. Stopping the team, Dale Fallien wrapped the lines around the whipsocket. He climbed over the wheel. His long arms lifted the minister and placed him in the bed of the buckboard. . . . Then he climbed again to the seat, and unwrapped the lines. The bay ponies stood, and Fallien, looking back over his shoulder, spoke to Paul Gunther:

"It's a big country," drawled Dale Fallien, "but not big enough, I reckon."

The bay horses moved slowly and the wheels of the buckboard turned monotonously as Dale Fallien drove ahead toward Ladron. Down the long canyon, the pines made dark shadows in the setting sun. But on the hills above, the white aspen leaves caught the last rays of light and threw them back and forth in dancing motes as the wind blew.

So Paul Gunther began his last long trip and his last service to these people that he had adopted. . . .

When in the dark Dale Fallien drove into Ladron, he stopped behind Mulli-

gan's shop. He knocked on the door, and when Mulligan answered, Fallien told the bartender what had happened. Mulligan said nothing at the moment but helped the tall man carry Gunther into the back room of the shop and lay him on a long table there.

Then Mulligan spoke slowly.

"I been expectin' this," he said. "I reckon it's tore now."

"What do you mean?" asked Fallien.

"I mean," Mulligan answered, "that the whole country will be up over this. Gunther was liked. The Mexicans think he's the Almighty, that's all. What'll they do when they find out?"

Fallien shook his head, and Mulligan looked musingly at the dead man on the table. "Him an' me," said Mulligan reflectively, "was sort of pardners, you might say. I fixed 'em up an' he buried 'em. I don't reckon you'll have to tell the law about this."

"Why?" questioned Fallien.

"Because—" Mulligan's voice was harsh—"there ain't much doubt with me that Wadell already knows about it. You can go an' hunt him up if you want to, though."

Fallien scrutinized the barber closely, and Mulligan continued to look at the body of the minister. Then, making up his mind, Fallien nodded curtly and went out. Mulligan, with hands that were gentle for so rough a man, began to take the ribboned coat from the limp form of Paul Gunther.

CHAPTER XIII.

Gwynne Rae's Ride

SOMEHOW the news of Paul Gunther's death spread over Ladron during the night. It went from mouth to ear, sibilantly. Gwynne Rae, wakening in the morning, found

her serving woman red eyed from weeping, and upon asking the reason for the grief, learned of the minister's murder. The serving woman added details—distorted details, true—and when Gwynne Rae went down the stairs to the great hall and met her brother and Arthur Cameron she was in possession of a number of facts and a greater number of fancies. The girl seemed to have no appetite, and Donald Rae commented upon the fact, whereupon Gwynne blurted out what she had heard.

The men were silent as they received the news, and Donald Rae looked questioningly at Cameron.

Cameron nodded. "I had heard of it," he said. "One of the men told me this morning when I was at the stables. Gunther was killed, murdered."

"Is there any information?" asked Rae, and again Cameron nodded.

"A man named Fallien brought Gunther in," he said. "Fallien has been around town for the last two weeks. He is a gambler or a mining speculator, I believe. He was riding in from Bridger when he found the body."

"But do they know who killed him?" asked Rae.

Cameron shrugged slightly. "There is a rumor," he answered. "Llano

Land had had some trouble with Gunther. It seems that Land has a woman friend here in town, Rose Juell. The story is that the woman fled to Gunther away from Land, and that Land was angry. Wadell has a posse out now, looking for Land."

Gwynne Rae looked at the speaker, and at her brother, and then, leaving her meal practically untouched, rose from the table and left the men.

For a while the girl moped about the great house. Then, its somberness oppressing her, she ordered a horse and went to her room to change into a riding habit. Without leaving word for either Donald or Cameron, she ordered her horse, mounted, and rode away, no immediate destination in mind, simply the idea of leaving Ladron House possessing her.

Well out of Ladron, riding north, she turned the roan mare toward the hills. And so by coincidence Gwynne Rae rode up the canyon that Llano Land had traversed, the roan mare taking the same trail that the yellow Jigger had taken.

As she rode, the girl was troubled. The fact of Paul Gunther's death was like a blow, a greater impact following lesser impacts. Paul Gunther! Gwynne had seen him about Ladron and once had seen him at close quarters. On the day of the funeral,

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when Will and Engra Loman had been buried, Paul Gunther had come up to Rose Juell and led her away. Rose Juell, pouring vituperation upon Gwynne, had ceased and gone with Gunther. There had been a magnetic force about the man, a personality that had driven hard from him and impinged upon those he met. Gwynne had felt the force of that personality.

Thinking of Gunther and Rose Juell brought Llano Land to mind. With a start, Gwynne realized that she had been thinking of Llano all the time, that it was not Gunther's death nor the flaring words of Rose Juell that obsessed her, but rather that quiet-faced, gray-eyed man who looked at her so steadily. She had never seen a man like him. Gunther might have possessed force, Arthur Cameron, too, was powerful, and Kent Null was filled with unforeseen strength. These things the girl knew, but Llano Land was different from these. . . .

When he entered a room, when she thought of him, exciting possibilities filled her mind. The man was galvanic, he had a faculty of remaining motionless and yet filling those about him with a sense of his latent power. What would it be like to be loved by Llano Land? Gwynne shuddered. Was Land a power for good or for evil? She did not know. She knew only that he filled her with a strange dread and yet that she was drawn to him. And thinking of Llano, yet another man was brought to mind—Wayne Metcalf.

Metcalf was gentle, Metcalf had nothing of the dynamic personality of Llano Land. Metcalf was silk where Llano was steel, smooth where Llano was hard and rough, untried whereas Llano had lived in the smoke of guns and stood against singing lead, and yet there was an odd resemblance

between the two. Somehow, Gwynne could not tell how, those two so dissimilar and yet similar personalities, were bound to meet. Would they clash? Gwynne could not say.

SHE threw off the thought of Llano Land and her eyes grew dreamy. Wayne Metcalf. She had been hard put to forestall Metcalf. The officer loved her, the girl knew. He was ready to declare that love and yet—and yet Gwynne was not ready for that declaration. Frankly, the girl analyzed herself. Metcalf was a gentleman, a man of position and of fortune. He was in the Army because that was the career that the Metcalfs followed, not through necessity. He was attractive, gentle with a strong gentleness. He was all that a girl even a girl like Gwynne Rae might desire—and yet . . . There was Llano Land.

The roan mare tossed her head and fought the reins. Gwynne Rae looked up, her mind emerging from her meditations. There was a cabin beside the road Gwynne followed. A pole fence surrounded the cabin and over the top of the fence peeped two small tow-colored heads. Gwynne reined the mare to a halt and looked at the cabin, at the straggling fence and at the tow-heads. Beneath the yellow hair, blue eyes showed anxiously, and small, freckled faces were set in earnest lines.

"Hello," said Gwynne, impulsively, and moved the mare closer to the fence.

The taller of the tow-heads answered the salutation.

"Hello."

Gwynne could see the immature lines of womanhood beneath the blue shirt and tattered overalls of the speaker. The boy, smaller of the two, scuffed a bare toe in the grass beside

the fence, and smiled. Two front teeth were gone, and the gap was startling in that widespread grin.

"Could I have a drink of water?" asked Gwynne.

"Get the lady a drink, Johnny," commanded the girl-child, and continued to stare at Gwynne's riding habit and at the girl. The boy, after a moment more of appraisal, scurried away.

"Do you live here?" asked Gwynne.

The small girl nodded solemnly. "Me an' Johnny an' mama," she answered. "Papa used to live here but he's in jail at Bridger." There was a matter-of-fact tone in her voice as one long accustomed to the statement.

"In jail?" said Gwynne, startled.

"He wouldn't pay rent to the Grant," explained the girl at the fence. "They put him in jail. They said he stole cattle."

The small boy, Johnny, came through a gate and, advancing on Gwynne, tendered a rusty dipper filled with water. Gwynne bent from her sidesaddle to take the dipper. The boy stood in the road, staring up at her.

"What is your father's name?" asked Gwynne, after taking a drink.

"Johnny Kinney. I'm Meg Kinney, an' that's Johhny."

Gwynne sipped again from the dipper, emptied it and tendered it to the boy. He took the handle and stood, still staring up at Gwynne.

"Do you know the lady in the big house in Ladron?" asked the girl at the fence. "She's a lady, mama says. She wears silk dresses and shoes, and she had a girl to comb her hair. Do you know her?"

Gwynne looked at the speaker. The small girl was very earnest. "I know her," said Gwynne.

Eagerness showed on the small face, "Does she sleep all day?" questioned Meg. "Does she sleep all day an' dance all night an' does she eat field larks an' cake?"

For a moment, Gwynne Rae wanted to laugh, then the earnestness of that freckled face stopped her. "No, dear," answered Gwynne. "I don't think she does that."

Disappointment registered on the up-turned face. "Mama said that she did," said Meg. "She said that the Grant wanted us to pay rent on our land so that the lady could have a new silk dress and her brother a new horse. Mama says that she's a—" a pause while Meg searched for the word, "—a harpy," she brought out triumphantly.

Gwynne Rae started slightly.

"Are harpies nice?" asked Meg Kinney.

"I'm afraid not, dear," answered Gwynne. "Where is your mother?"

"She's in the field," said the girl, "She has to work in the field since papa was put in jail."

Gwynne stared again at the cabin, at the pole fence and at the children. She was looking at them with new eyes, eyes that had never seen before. The cabin was delapidated and needed repairs. The fence showed broken gaps. The children were ragged, shoeless, but clean.

"Is your mother going to pay rent to the Grant?" asked Gwynne Rae, her voice a little harsh.

Meg Kinney shook her head. "She's going to get papa out of jail," she answered with implicit faith. "Mama says that this is our land and that she doesn't have to pay rent for it. She says that the Grant will take it if she doesn't."

Gwynne looked up. A slight figure, covered with blue overalls and a blue

shirt, the whole topped by a tattered straw hat, was striding toward the fence.

The woman stopped beside the children and looked at Gwynne Rae. No older than Gwynne, her face showed hard, harsh lines and was weathered and worn. Still, a certain beauty remained. This woman must have been lovely, would still have been except for the wear of weather and fatigue.

For a long moment she stood and then she spoke.

"So you have come to frightening the children now?" she said slowly. "The Grant has fallen to that! Come, Johnny. Come away." She placed one arm about Meg's shoulders. Her eyes searched Gwynne's:

"But you don't—" began Gwynne. Then angrily, "I stopped for a drink of water."

"You've had it!" Harsh contempt edged her voice. "Now you can go. And you can tell Cameron and the Grant that I won't pay rent and that I'll hold my place in spite of them."

"I want—" said Gwynne.

"Go!" commanded the woman by the fence, her arms protectingly about her children. "You may put us off and you may keep my husband in jail, but you can't have these!"

Something blinded Gwynne Rae. Tears hot and scalding, fell upon her cheeks. The red roan mare, impatient, moved, and Gwynne did not check her. So this was what the Duro Grant did? So this was what it meant to have land and cattle and to talk of rights and squatters, and of "our land?"

Gwynne turned the mare, and the animal, rested and impatient, moved at a canter down the road. At the fence, Margaret Kinney stood, head raised defiantly, her arms about her

children, and watched the roan mare and her rider disappear.

GWYNNE RAE rode back the way she had come, and if she had been bemused as she rode into the hills, she now had even more of which to think. Those children, babies really, and their responsibilities, so gravely shouldered, and that slight, worn woman who had faced her . . . Gwynne was not angry, but she was upset.

So this was what it meant to have the Duro Grant, to live in Ladron House, to wear silk next the skin, to play upon a great square rosewood piano? It took things like that broken cabin and that toil-worn woman and the shoeless children to make a world in which Gwynne Rae ate from Spode china and drank from crystal and rested her elbows upon damask while she laughed at a man across the table. It took these things!

The sky darkened as the sun slid down and the mountain tops were gold, with purple beneath the gold. The roan mare's hoofs beat a tattoo on the road. Gwynne Rae shook her red-gold head and her eyes were dark with knowledge and with pain.

Dinner was past when she reached Ladron House. Arthur Cameron paced back and forth in the hall and Donald Rae stood with his hands locked behind him, staring out of the window. The fingers of his hands twisted in his anxiety.

The two men met the girl as she entered.

"Gwynne," began Cameron angrily, "where have you been? What kept you so late? We—"

Anger was crystal clear in Gwynne Rae's mind as she looked at Cameron. "I think," she said, a great lady again now, "that you have mistaken your place, Mr. Cameron. I am the one

to ask questions." And with that she swept past Cameron and to the stairs, her riding skirt trailing. At the stair she stopped.

"Donald," said Gwynne, "can you come to my room? I should like to talk with you."

Surprise showed in Donald Rae's face. He nodded, and with a glance at the glowering Cameron, followed his sister.

He was gone for a long time. When he returned below-stairs, Cameron was still in the hall. Donald Rae's fresh, boyish face was troubled.

"My sister has been talking to me, Arthur," he said. "Tomorrow I want to go over the Grant's affairs with you. Things are wrong."

"What is wrong, Donald?" asked Cameron.

Donald shook his head. "I haven't paid enough attention to what is going on," he said. "We ought not to have trouble on the Grant."

Cameron smiled. "There isn't any trouble," he countered. "We have some people on Grant land, and we are informing them that they must pay rent to us. For that we give them protection and privileges. Certainly that is only right. Those who refuse to pay rent, we are caring for by legal measures. Gwynne is upset, Donald. Something has happened to upset her."

Donald Rae flushed. "Gwynne—" he began, and then stopped. It would not do to inform Cameron concerning his stormy session with his sister. "Just the same, I think it is time I took my duties more seriously," he announced lamely. "After all, Arthur, I represent the syndicate, and I am responsible to them. My father is a principal stockholder."

Cameron smiled. "I'll be glad to go over things with you," he said

smoothly. "There is a matter engaging me now that I would be glad to be advised upon. Since the northern boundary of the Grant has been confirmed, we find that Marthastown lies inside the Grant limits. The gold that has been taken from there legally belongs to the Grant. We have notified Greybull and the other miners that they are operating unlawfully. They have cheated the syndicate out of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Now Greybull tells us that he will not cease to operate his dredge and the other miners are also operating. What would you suggest, Donald?"

Donald Rae stared at his questioner. Slow of mind, more interested in horses and dogs than in any other things, he could not quite comprehend what Cameron had told him.

Cameron spoke again. "Of course," he said softly, "we can go ahead and ignore Greybull's acts. We can let them rob the syndicate, your father among others, of what is rightfully theirs. We can withdraw the actions we have begun, to recover what has been stolen, and let them continue to stall. If we do that, they will think we are afraid, of course, and—"

Donald Rae's fist thumped down on the top of the table that was beside him. "No!" he said. "We can't do that! I'm not afraid of—"

Cameron interrupted, nodding. "I thought that you would want to proceed," he said. "I'll be glad to go over things with you tomorrow, Donald, and explain what we have done. Perhaps, after all, you have been a trifle negligent in your duties. I'm glad that Gwynne mentioned the fact."

"Gwynne!" Donald Rae's face was red. "What does a girl know about business? I'll be in your office early, Arthur. Early."

"That will be fine." Cameron smiled. "I'll go to the office, now, and begin to put things in shape so that we can find them easily. Good night, Donald."

He turned and walked away. Donald Rae, after a moment's hesitation, went to the sideboard and poured himself a drink from the decanter that stood there.

In his office Cameron found Kent Null, lounging in a chair, a glass of whisky and water in his hands. Null looked up inquiringly.

"The girl talked to Rae," said Cameron, answering that look. "He thinks that he's going to take hold of things. I'm going to have a talk with him in the morning and go over the Grant affairs."

Kent Null nodded. "And that will be fine," he commented.

"Why?" Cameron frowned.

"Because," said Null, "matters are coming to a head at Marthastown. Now, no matter what happens, Donald will take the responsibility for it. You and I, Arthur, are in the clear so far as the syndicate is concerned."

Cameron's face cleared slowly. "By George, you're right!" he said. "You're right, Kent. No matter what happens, Donald will be responsible."

Null laughed. "Donald and Lieutenant Metcalf," he amended. "They'll pull the chestnuts, Arthur. Our fingers won't be burned. . . ."

CHAPTER XIV

Owlhoot Camp

HIGH in the hills, in the hidden spot that Mat McCarthy called the "Junta," Llano Land helped make camp. Horses were led through the pines that fringed the mountain bog and, there in a little park hidden

by the pines and aspens, were hobbled and turned loose. Back in the pines Virge Savoy swung an ax and trees fell. A lean-to went up, cross-thatched with pine boughs. Poles were cut and set and a tarpaulin thrown over them and pegged down to make an open ended A of canvas. A fire twinkled among the trees, and the dusk closing in as the sunset behind Copper Mountain made the fire a red coal that blinked and winked like the coal in a smoker's pipe.

Llano took a hand in the work—and when the activity was done and Hamarick was cooking over the fire, he seated himself on a log beside Mat McCarthy.

"An' now what?" asked Llano.

"I was goin' to ask you the same," answered McCarthy. "We're goin' to lay up here. We got connections in Ladron. Word will come out to us after a while, an then we'll know what's what, but what about you, Llano?"

Llano disregarded that question. "Your connections in Ladron may not be so good," he drawled. "When I first found you, Mat, I knew that the Grant was letting you stay where you were. I didn't know why. You told me that you and your boys moved the Grant boundary marker. Was that why they let you alone?"

McCarthy finished stuffing his pipe, lit it and puffed twice. "That was why," he said quietly.

"And when you moved the marker, you knew what it meant," insisted Llano. "You knew what you were doing. You new the sort of hell you'd let loose on the Grant."

McCarthy shrugged. "Look, Llano," he drawled, "I'm a cow thief. I'm fat old Mat McCarthy, a danged rustler. The two Savoyes will be hung if ever they go back to Kansas.

Hamarick's on the wanted list in Montana. Do you think we stopped to figger things out when it was put up to us to move that rock?"

Llano was silent for a moment. "You got another man," he suggested.

Again McCarthy's fat shoulder shifted. "A wild kid," he said. "Bill Westfall. He lived in this country. He threw in with us awhile back."

Llano returned to the attack. "You threw in with the Grant," he accused. "You—"

There was anger in McCarthy's voice as he interrupted. "I told you we didn't figger," he snapped. "We had a hideout. We had a place to hold cattle. We were let alone. Capes an' Null propositioned us to move that rock an' offered us shelter for what we were doin'. We didn't think. Who'd think ahead in business like ours?"

Llano grunted. "But you're thinking ahead now," he commented dryly.

"You're damn right I am!" The anger in McCarthy flared out. "We didn't think of the killin' an' trouble we'd let loose when we moved that rock, or we wouldn't of done it. Now, by the Lord, the Grant has turned on us. The Grant can look out. They rode in to the cabin today ready to kill us like we was coyotes in a trap. Any Grant man I see over my rifle sights is dead! I—"

"And that will make it all right," interrupted Llano, softly. "You'll rustle Grant cattle. You'll raise hell with the Grant, and it will make things all right for what you did. Mat—"

"It'll help!" snapped McCarthy savagely.

THERE was silence between the men, over by the fire, Shorty Hamarick straightened and rubbed smoke from

his eyes. Virge Savoy came out of the tarpaulin tent. There was a plaint in McCarthy's voice when he finally spoke.

"What else can I do, Llano? I didn't know—"

"I don't know, Mat," comforted Llano, "I just don't know."

Again there was silence. Llano broke it. "Jack Ames was killed in Ladron" he said reflectively. "I found that out. He was killed there and buried. There wasn't anything on him that identified him. Mulligan, the barber, told me about burying a yellow-haired man with a wedge-shaped birth mark on his chin."

McCarthy half turned so that he faced Llano. "Mulligan?" he questioned. "Are you sure it was Jack, Llano?"

"There's no doubt," said Llano grimly. "Mulligan said that the man's left leg had been broken between the knee and the ankle. Who else but Jack could it be?"

McCarthy thought for a moment and then shook his head. "It was Jack," he said positively. "What are you goin' to do, Llano?"

"Find the man that killed him," answered Llano, grimly.

"How?"

"By tracing the horses Jack sold." Llano fumbled for the makings, and began to roll a cigarette. "There's one at Ladron House and Greybull got one. That will put me on a trail. Someone who bought a horse from Jack will know who he was friendly with and when he went to Ladron and who was with him there. Then I'll go from that."

"You don't ever let go, do you?" asked McCarthy admiringly.

Llano licked the flap of his cigarette and grimaced. "I'm not getting ahead very fast," he said ruefully.

"Greybull thinks I'm a Grant man and he wouldn't talk to me. He—"

"Why does Greybull think that?"

"Because of Kent Null." Llano lit his smoke. "Null told him I was, and it looks like it. You see, Mat, I had to go to bat for Null."

By the fire Shorty Hamarick called softly, "Come on an' get it, while it's hot."

Llano and McCarthy stood up. "To bat for Kent Null?" asked McCarthy, incredulously.

"I'll tell you," said Llano. They walked toward the fire, and in brief, sharp sentences Llano told McCarthy of what had happened at Gra'maw Stamps' and afterward in Marthastown.

"Well, I'll be damned," said McCarthy when the tale was finished. "And now what, Llano?"

"I don't know," Llano answered.

McCarthy stooped and picked up a plate. "There'll be word out here soon," he said, moving around the fire. "Bill Westfall will be out from Ladron, an' he'll tell us what's happenin'. You lay up with us, Llano, until we hear."

Arch Savoy, spearing a steak from a frying pan, looked up and grinned. "I don't give a damn what we do," he drawled, "as long as we got Shorty to cook an' there's plenty of Grant beef."

When the meal was finished the men left the fire, Hamarick and Arch going to look after the horses, Virge bringing water from a spring by the bog. With the dishes washed, the fire was extinguished and the men crawled into their blankets in the tarp tent and under the lean-to.

THE next morning, when the dawn broke, the men got up. Breakfast was cooked and eaten and Arch Savoy,

carrying a rifle, pulled out of the camp, crossed the bog and climbed the ridge. From that vantage point he could see anyone coming toward the canyon below. Thus guarded, the men relaxed. The camp was improved in minor details and Hamarick found a deck of cards. He inveigled the others into joining him, and on a blanket spread beneath a pine tree, a game of draw pitch raged. At noon they ate a cold snack and Virge Savoy went to relieve his brother. So the day wore on, and when darkness fell in the canyon Hamarick again kindled a fire and cooked.

"We'll butcher a Grant heifer tomorrow," said McCarthy as he drank hot coffee. "Bill ought to be out—"

McCarthy stopped in mid-sentence. There was a horse coming across the bog. Arch Savoy picked up a rifle and stepped back from the fire. McCarthy, alert and hand on his six-shooter, stood in the shadows. Hamarick had disappeared, and Llano Land had stepped away to join Virge Savoy in the shelter of the pines.

The horse came on steadily, feet splashing on the marshy ground. Then the splashes were changed to regular, dull beats on the dry earth and a rider came into the dim light of the fire, stopped and dismounted.

Mat McCarthy stepped into the circle of firelight. "We just spoke of you, Bill," drawled McCarthy.

The others moved forward. Llano found himself examining this newcomer. He saw a boy, apple-cheeked and innocent, blue-eyed and with down still upon his cheeks. A kid, thought Llano, and then as the blue eyes encountered his he revised his opinion suddenly. This Bill Westfall looked like a kid but his eyes gave the lie to his appearance.

"This is Llano Land, Bill," said

McCarthy, making the introduction.

Westfall nodded. "Land," he said, and his voice was a boyish tenor. "They're kind of lookin' for you around Ladron, Land."

"Why?" demanded Mat McCarthy. "What . . . ?"

"You can give me a cup of coffee," said Westfall. "I'll tell you while I eat. Mulligan sure had an earful of me when I come in."

Mulligan! Llano was startled. So the peg-legged, taciturn barber was the connection for the outlaws in Ladron! Llano would not have suspected.

"What did he have to say?" snapped McCarthy.

Westfall crunched on a sandwich of bread and meat and took coffee from the tin cup. "There's hell to pay in Ladron," he said, and seemed to relish his words.

McCarthy was impatient. "Go on, tell it!" he commanded. "We know that there was hell in Ladron. We raised some of it. Capes come out to the cabin to plant an empty Wells-Fargo box on us. There was a posse right behind him. Capes run into trouble an' we packed up an' pulled out before the posse got there. Was that what you figured to tell us?"

"So, that's what happened to Capes," drawled Westfall. "They was wonderin' about it in Ladron. Nope, that ain't what I had to tell you. Preacher Gunther was killed yesterday, up by Segundo Creek. He was brought in, an' the word has gone out that you killed him, Land!"

Dead silence struck the group. Then McCarthy snapped a question. "Who says that?"

"It's just around," answered Westfall. "Nobody is sayin' it particularly, but it seems like everybody has got that idea. There was a dance hall

woman named Juell stayin' with the preacher and the story is that Land an' Gunther had words over her."

"Why—" began Llano.

McCarthy forestalled that. "Land was with us yesterday!" he said. "He was the one that fixed Capes up with what he needed. He couldn't of killed Gunther. He—"

"Do you think," drawled Westfall, "that killin' Capes is goin to make the Grant love him? Mebbe you'll ride in, Mat, an' make him an alibi. They're sayin' in Ladron that you an' Virge an' Arch an' Shorty was the ones that stopped the stage an' killed the messenger. Nobody in particular sayin' it. Just talk. Mebbe you'd like to ride in an' stand up for Land."

* * *

McCarthy swore helplessly, and Llano Land, his eyes on Westfall, asked a question. "What happened to Rose Juell?"

"She's still at the preacher's house," answered Westfall, drinking again from his cup. "That ain't all I got to tell you, Mat."

"Get on with it," growled McCarthy.

"The Grant has stopped Greybull an' the fellows at Marthastown from workin' their claims," Westfall announced. "The miners are bunchin' up an' they're goin' down an take Ladron apart. Mulligan says that Cameron has sent for the soldiers from Bridger."

"What's that to us?" asked McCarthy.

Westfall grinned. "Nothin'," he answered, "only now wouldn't be any too good a time for you to start takin' it out of the Grant in case you had it in mind."

"What else do you know?" rasped McCarthy.

Westfall refilled his cup. "That's

about the size of it," he said. "You want me to go back to town tomorrow?"

McCarthy walked around the fire. "I'll tell you tomorrow," he answered. "I got to think this over."

McCarthy sat on a log. Llano Land squatted on a boot-heel and rolled a cigarette, his eyes far away and the motions of his fingers mechanical. The others stood around Bill Westfall, their low voices asking questions, and the fire blinked red, dying away. . .

CHAPTER XV

Guns at Ladron House

WHILE that fire blinked red under Cooper Mountain, a glowing coal in the night, far down a canyon north of Ladron another fire blossomed. It grew from a spark into a licking flame that shone yellow along the side of a house. Rising, black smoke at its tips hidden by the black night, this second fire showed a broken fence and a weedy patch of plowed ground. It showed horses, head lifted, ears pricked forward, frightened at the fire's growth. The horses were hooded, masked by crude covers, and the riders, too, were hooded and covered. A horse moved and an empty kerosene can clanged, and then, from the house, came a rising, wailing scream. A woman, a child caught in her arms, ran from the building.

Across the fence a rider, a tall man, lifted a steel-tipped arm, leveling a

weapon at the tow-headed girl-child that cowered before the house. Another rider beside him struck up that arm and the shot spouted into the night. "Damn you, Huerta!" raged Dick Wadell. "Damn you! It's a kid!"

Again the woman appeared, carrying another child. Her nightgown was on fire and the boy in her arms screamed again and again with the pain of burns.

The riders across the fence turned their horses. With the kerosene can clanging, they rode down the canyon, while in the dooryard the woman beat out flames with work-calloused hands.

Later, in Ladron, Dick Wadell knocked on the side door of Ladron House—the door to Cameron's office.

"What is it?"

"Wadell," answered the man outside. "We set fire at Kinney's. The woman an' the kids got out all right."

Again there was a pause, and then Cameron spoke. "Have you heard anything of Capes?"

"No," answered Dick Wadell, and remembering the bank account in Trinity, "we ain't goin' to, neither."

"Be here early in the morning," ordered Cameron. And the door closed.

And again while the fire glowed under Copper Mountain and while Llano Land lit the cigarette he had rolled, a rider came to the kitchen door of Gra'maw Stamps' tavern. Dismounting, he knocked cautiously on the door.

When the door was opened and light

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from a lamp streamed out there was no one in sight, but a voice whispered:

"Gra'maw! Gra'maw!"

Gra'maw Stamps blew out the light. "John Kinney," she answered, her voice as low as that of the man who called. "I thought you were in jail at Bridger!"

"I broke out. Let me in, Gra'maw! I've got to have a horse an' something to eat."

"Come in," said Gra'maw Stamps, and stepped back from the door.

The door closed and it was dark in the kitchen. Then a match flamed and the lamp flickered feebly until the chimney was replaced. When the flickering had been supplanted by a warm yellow glow, Gra'maw Stamps stood in the middle of the kitchen, covered by an old wrapper. Against the wall beside the door was a blond-haired, white-faced young fellow, his eyes worn and haggard.

"Johnny Kinney," said Gra'maw Stamps again, "you set down. I'll get you somethin' to eat an' there's a horse in the corral."

John Kinney slumped into a chair. "I knew you'd help me," he said tensely. "Have yo useen Margaret, Gra'maw?"

Mrs. Stamps shook her head. She was padding from cupboard to table, setting on the table, such cold food as she could find. John Kinney picked up a piece of bread, laid a slab of cold meat on it and munched wolfishly.

"Margaret has been stayin' on your place," said Gra'maw Stamps. "She's been holdin' it down. The Grant wanted her to pay rent an' she wouldn't. When did you get out, John?"

"This afternoon," answered Kinney, gulping a morsel of food. "Pope Sanchez got careless. He come into my cell an' I got his gun an' hit him

over the head an' took his keys. I hid out till it was dark. Then I stole a horse an' rode to here."

"Where are you goin' from here, John?"

"Home," said John Kinney. "I got to see Margaret an' the kids. I tell you, I got to, Gra'maw."

The old woman blinked. There was something in John Kinney's voice, something in his tone, that had brought tears to her eyes.

Kinney wolfed down more food, eating ravenously. "I'll take care of the horse I took," he said. "Nobody'll ever find him around here, Gra'maw. If they catch me, nobody'll know I been here."

Gra'maw Stamps blew her nose violently. "I ain't a-carin' if they know or not!" she announced defiantly. "There's some things that a body just can't stand. I paid rent to the Grant, but they don't own me. You eat some bread an' jelly, Johnny. I'll stir up a fire an' make you coffee."

But John Kinney came to his feet, protesting. "I got to go on," he said urgently. "I got to go on tonight while it's dark. Don't bother, Gra'maw. You been good to me the way it is. I'm goin'."

Before the old woman could speak, before she could protest, Kinney was at the door. He looked at her.

"Blow out the light," he requested. "Blow it out an' I'm gone, Gra'maw. An' . . . an', thanks."

The lamp died black. Darkness in the kitchen. The door opened and closed. After a while Gra'maw Stamps listened, heard horses moving away from the corral, stealthy hoofbeats. Then they were gone.

"Pore boy!" she said. "Pore, pore boy!"

Up under Copper Mountain the fire died to embers, its last flickering flame



gone and only dull red remaining. Llano Land got up from his boot-heels and Mat McCarthy arose from his log.

"Tomorrow," said Llano decisively, "I'll go to Ladron."

DAVE FALLIEN sat on the porch of the Saint George Hotel and watched Ladron. Ladron was worth watching. The place was like a kettle on the fire just before it boils. Early in the morning, men began to filter into the town by ones and twos. Hardy men, roughly dressed. Then later, when the sun was higher, a body of men had come riding down Ladron Canyon. Pat Greybull had been in the lead of this group, and Greybull had gone directly to Ladron House. The others had gone on to town.

They were there now. Men with

time on their hands, men that were tense, men who felt that they had a just cause for wrath. They were waiting for Greybull to come out of Ladron House, and while they waited they drank whisky and talked to each other. Greybull had been in Ladron House for over an hour. . . . Fallien's light blue eyes were narrow slits as he stared at the black bulk of the house.

As he sat watching, a little body of men came from the town and moved determinedly toward the house on the hill. They passed the Saint George and Fallien could catch some of the

words that they were speaking. Fragments of sentences drifted to him. "Been there an hour . . ." "Greybull's makin' a deal for himsel . . ." "What's he care about us . . . ?"

The men went on, reached Ladron House, and paused. Apparently they were debating on the course they should pursue. The debate seemed to resolve itself and an agreement was



"Paul Gunther . . . the preacher," said Dale Fallien softly.

evidently reached, for two of the men left the crowd and went to the door of the house. They stood there waiting.

The door of the house opened and Cameron and Donald Rae, accompanied by a short stocky man, came out. Fallien saw the short man lift his hand, and as the men in front of the house grew quiet, Cameron's companion spoke. Fallien could not hear the words. He lifted himself from his chair, shook his long body and set foot on the steps that led down from the porch of the Saint George. . . .

Up at Ladron House, Pat Greybull, with Cameron and Rae flanking him, spoke to the men assembled in the

street. "I been tryin' to make a dicker, men," he said. "I been talkin' to Mr. Cameron an' to Mr. Rae. They got the law on their side. We're on the Grant. They showed me. They say that we can operate if we'll pay rent. . . . That—"

The crowd was no longer still. It had moved as Greybull spoke, and the men who had gone to the door of Ladron House had returned to their companions. Now there were angry words, voices raised to refute Greybull. The little man held up his hand again, striving for silence, but he could not get it.

"You made a deal!" a voice called accusingly from the crowd. "You sold us out, Greybull. You—"

"Wait!" pleaded Greybull. "Wait. I'm with you, boys. I—"

* * *

Dale Fallien stood on the board sidewalk in front of the Saint George. There was the pound of a running horse from the direction of town. Fallien turned, and the horse, sweating and barely able to keep its feet, went past him. The rider tumbled from the horse before Ladron House. The men in the crowd parted, moving back to give the horseman room. He did not pause. The horse went on, staggering in its run, but the rider, feet widespread, threw up his arm and a shot rang out.

Beside Greybull, Donald Rae reeled back against the door-casing. Cameron had a gun in his hand but he did not fire. A rifle spoke from the window above the door, the second story window. The rider took two staggering steps back, and went down. Greybull jerked himself away from the doorway, running toward the men in the street.

Other windows of the great, black house were raised. Rifles, the barrels

slim and wicked, projected from those windows. Cameron had swept up Donald Rae and gone through the door, all in one swift movement. The door was closed, black and solid. Out in the street a miner brought out a gun and fired a shot. That shot was answered from Ladron House. The rifles in the windows spoke, and the men in the street, each striving for his own safety, scattered and ran like a covey of quail found by a hunter.

Where in one moment there had been a group of angry men, there were three bodies in the street and that was all. . . .

At the first fire, Fallien had moved. His long legs took him efficiently to the corner of the Saint George and around that corner. Now he stood peering out, waiting for the next move.

It came swiftly. A man ran from cover toward the limp bodies in the street. His purpose was apparent. He wanted to get to those men. One of them at least was not dead, but wounded. That running man had gone to bring a friend to shelter.

Almost, he reached his goal. Then again a rifle snapped in the great house. The running man sprawled out.

FROM his vantage point, Fallien could see the house and the men about it. They had been taken by surprise, these miners, but they rallied swiftly. Men were coming from the town, running toward the hill, armed men, these, angry, loaded with resentment and whisky.

"The damned fools!" muttered Fallien. "They've set it on fire now. Why did they start that?"

From various places about the house men began to shoot. Their fire was desultory and ineffective. A window-pane shattered in the second floor. Chips of adobe flew from a corner. In

the street, a man, shot down in the first flurry of fire, began to crawl toward a wall, painfully dragging a leg.

Fallien shrugged his high, thin shoulders. "I suppose," he said, half aloud, "that I got to—"

He did not finish his sentence. High and thin, carrying, the notes of a bugle came floating. Fallien settled back, his shoulders against the wall.

"So that's why they started," he murmured, as though answering some question in his mind. "They'd sent for the troops."

A dry voice at his elbow made Fallien whirl, hand shooting up to an armpit holster. "Yeah," said the voice, "I reckon that's why."

"Land!" exclaimed Fallien.

Llano Land was standing, facing him, a saturnine grin on his thin lips. "You look like you weren't expecting me," he drawled.

The surprise died from Fallien's face. His eyes were impassive once more, and his drawl matched Llano's. "I wasn't," he agreed. "Naturally, I wasn't."

"An' why?" Llano's voice was thin.

"Because," said Fallien, "the word had been passed that you killed Paul Gunther."

"An' that's why I'm here," explained Llano. "Come on, let's look. The Army's about got to town."

Fallien peered around the corner of the Saint George once more. There, where the bodies had been in Ladron's street, there were now blue-clad cavalymen. As Fallien looked, men swung down from their horses. He heard sharp commands, and a group of soldiers trotted toward the Saint George.

"With all the trimmings," Llano commented sardonically. "Now watch 'em come out of the house."

Indeed, there was activity at Ladron House. The door opened, and men came out. Two of these were easily recognizable as Kent Null and Arthur Cameron. They walked across the porch and down the steps, approaching a stocky figure on horseback.

"An' Metcalf, too," Llano's voice continued impassively. "That makes him a hero, I guess."

Fallien's eyes were bright as he turned them off his companion. "I'm damned if I sabe you, Land," he said.

"There's nothing to sabe." Llano laughed briefly. "I come over here on private business. I been dragged into something else. Now I guess that's my business, too. . . ."

He stepped ahead, turning the corner of the adobe hotel building. Fallien waited a moment, and then followed. When Fallien cleared the corner, Llano was on the porch, pulling open the door of the hotel.

In front of Ladron House, Metcalf had dismounted and was walking toward the building with Cameron and Null on either side of him. Fallien stood on the front porch of the Saint George and then opened the door and went in.

CHAPTER XVI

Trapped

WAYNE METCALF, pulling off his heavy cavalry gauntlets, walked through the doors of Ladron House. For a moment he stood in the great hall of the place, looking around him. Then, his eyes becoming accustomed to the dimness, he saw a couch across the room and a figure bending over the couch. Cameron and Null had followed the officer through the door and were now on either side of him. Cameron had spoken, but

Metcalf did not catch the words. He walked across the room, spur chains clinking, and halted beside the couch. Gwynne Rae, her cheeks tear-stained, looked up.

"Gwynne . . ." exclaimed Metcalf.

The girl came up from her knees. For a moment it seemed that she would throw herself into Metcalf's arms. Then, with a visible effort at control, she answered, "Donald . . . !"

Instantly, Metcalf was kneeling beside the couch. Donald Rae lay there, his face white. His coat and shirt had been removed, and there was a cloth, blood-stained, wrapped across his shoulder and under his arm.

"Silly of me," said Donald Rae, faintly. "It isn't bad, really."

Metcalf looked up at Gwynne. The girl stood at his right, her hands clasped and her eyes anxious. "I'm all right, Gwynne," said Donald Rae, answering that look.

"The ambulance and our surgeon are following down the canyon," announced Metcalf, rising from beside the couch. "If you'll call Sergeant Cassidy, I'll have a man dispatched to hurry them."

Kent Null stepped away, and Metcalf turned to Cameron.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice stern.

Cameron met the officer's eyes. "We sent for you yesterday," he answered. "As you know, the boundary of the Grant has been confirmed. We find that the Grant includes Marthastown and the valley below it. Naturally, Donald wished to protect the interests of the company and an injunction was issued forbidding the miners at Marthastown to operate until some settlement was reached with the Grant."

"Yes?" questioned Metcalf.

"They refused to obey the injunc-

tion," Cameron continued, his voice smooth. "The local officers attempted to enforce it, and there was a concerted movement from Marthastown to Ladron.

"Greybull, who is the principal operator there, met with Donald and Kent and myself this morning. We reached an agreement. We were to receive a portion of the proceeds, and Greybull was explaining it to a group of his men. Donald and Kent and I were with him on the porch. A rider came from town, burst through the crowd, leaped from his horse and fired a shot. It struck Donald here in the shoulder."

"And then?" snapped Metcalf.

"Naturally, we were prepared to defend ourselves," purred Cameron. "We have been threatened time and again. The guards we had posted returned the fire."

"You sent word—" began Metcalf.

There came an interruption, then. Null, accompanied by a grizzled faced soldier with the yellow chevrons of a sergeant on his sleeve, came through the door and across the hall. The sergeant saluted.

Metcalf spoke swiftly. "Dispatch a rider to the ambulance, Sergeant," he ordered. "Present my compliments to Doctor von Wiegand and beg him to come on with all possible speed. He is needed here."

"Yis, sorr!" said the sergeant, and saluted. Nevertheless he did not turn away.

"What is it?" snapped Metcalf.

"There's a bunch of men, sorr," said the sergeant. "They came up from town. Will the lieutenant step outside an 'speak to them?"

Metcalf frowned. "Miners?" he snapped. "We'll look after them presently. I've already sent Sergeant Connor and a patrol—"

"Beg pardon sorr." Cassidy took the privilege of an old soldier, and interrupted his officer, "They ain't miners. They're cowboys an' farmers by the looks of them. Will the lieutenant please to come out an' see 'em?"

"Send a man for the ambulance!" ordered Metcalf. "I'll be out in a moment."

The grizzled sergeant saluted and turned sharply about.

Metcalf turned to where Gwynne again knelt beside her brother.

"The doctor is coming, Gwynne," he said, and the girl's name was an endearment on his lips. "I must—"

Gwynne Rae reached up and caught his hand. "We will be safe, now that you are here," she said impulsively. "Come back, Wayne. Come back when you can."

There was a promise in the girl's eyes, a promise that Metcalf could not miss, nor did Cameron and Null, standing beside the officer, miss that promise. Null glanced at Cameron. The dark man's cheeks were a dull red and his lips were tight and bloodless.

Metcalf held the girl's hand a moment, the pressure of his own hand firm and reassuring. Then, relinquishing his grip, he turned.

"You will excuse me, gentlemen," apologized the officer, and hurried across the hall to the door.

OUTSIDE Ladron House, veteran noncommissioned officers had taken charge of the troop. A mounted patrol had swung off, riding through Ladron. Troopers stood by horses, and just in front of Ladron House was a dismounted squad standing at ease, their carbines at the order. There were four men, ranchmen evidently, standing close by the squad, and beyond and toward the Saint George Hotel there was a crowd, a mob of men. Some

of these were miners, but there were teamsters in the mob and a sprinkling of dark-skinned natives, but the men that stood in the front, the dangerous men, were ranchmen. Their clothing told that.

Metcalf looked at the disposal of the troop and was pleased; he looked at the mob, and worried wrinkles creased his forehead. They were too silent, too ominously silent. As he glanced to his right he saw in the shadow of Ladron House four bodies laid prone on the ground. A blue-clad man was bending over one of these. They were the wounded, men brought down in the shooting that preceded the cavalry troop's arrival.

A murmur arose from the crowd near the Saint George and, looking behind him, Metcalf saw Null and Cameron, with Dick Wadell beside them, come through the door of the house. His frown increased and he walked down the steps toward the men who awaited him. As he reached them, he spoke crisply.

"What do you want?"

There was silence for a moment and then a lanky, red-headed man who wore chaps and chewed tobacco, answered the question. "We want a lot of things, soldier," said the redhead.

"Such as . . . ?" suggested Metcalf pointedly.

"We want John Kinney, for one thing," the redhead shifted his chew.

"Kinney?" questioned Metcalf.

"He's over there." The red-headed man jerked his thumb toward Ladron House. "Kinney's place was burned by them murderers last night. His wife an' his kids got out but reckon he don't know it. They're in town. Kinney come ridin' in wild eyed an' he taken a shot at that Rae feller. Got him, too. We want Kinney."

"If Kinney attacked Mr. Rae his



Rose Juell

place is in jail," said Metcalf decisively. "I'll put him there."

The red head was slowly shaken. "Nope, mister," contradicted the red-headed man. "Nope. John's got hurt. We're goin' to take him an' look after him. We want them murderers in Ladron House, too. We want Null an' Cameron an' that damned Wadell."

Metcalf looked steadily at the speaker. "I order you to disperse," he said calmly. "Martial law has been declared in Ladron. At another time and place I'll meet your leaders and we will arrive at a settlement. But mob rule is not to be tolerated. You men go to your homes!"

The officer lifted his voice with the last words so that they carried to the crowd. There was an angry murmur following the words, a ripple of unrest across the waiting men. The redhead spoke again.

"There's two hundred men there," said the redhead gently, lifting a hand toward the crowd. "They can blow you off the face of the earth, mister." Metcalf made no answer to that. He wheeled, turning his broad back on the redhead and his companion. His voice came strong:

"As skirmishers . . .!"

The blue-clad men moved. Veteran troopers, these. For each four, one man remained holding horses. The others spread in a thin blue line across the street in front of Ladron House.

"Load!" Metcalf's command was clear. The breech-blocks of the Springfield carbines snicked open. Long, blunt-tipped, brass shells went into the .45-70's. Metcalf again wheeled.

"I have ordered you to disperse," he said calmly. "My next order will be to fire."

The red-headed man glanced back over his shoulder. He was as calm as Metcalf. Behind him, the miners,

the teamsters, and the cowmen had spread out. They, too, were ready. Here a Colt glinted dully, here a Winchester lifted a wicked snout. The red-headed man looked back at Metcalf.

"You an' me," he observed, "are right square in the middle. Kind of between a rock an' a hard spot. You shoot an' they'll shoot, an' you an' me won't be interested no more."

METCALF eyed the speaker. There was a grim smile on the redhead's lips. From beyond the mob came the clatter of horses and the head of the patrol, one mounted squad, swung into view. In the lead, big sergeant Connors shot up an arm, and the patrol halted.

Metcalf looked at the red-headed man. "The patrol," suggested Metcalf gently, "will charge. And then—"

The red-headed man spat. "Nope," he drawled, "there's eight or ten men on the roofs of them adobes above yore sodiers. They'll be knocked out of the saddle before they can move. I ain't overlooked a bet."

Metcalf waited. The red-headed man spoke again. "We want John Kinney," he declared. "We want them murderin' devils in Ladron House. Do we get 'em?"

Metcalf shook his head.

The red-headed man turned. "I reckon we got to take what we want, boys," he called.

"Just a minute," Metcalf interjected. "You know what this means, I suppose? Perhaps you can wipe out the troop. A good many of you will be killed doing that. Then there will be other troops and still other troops if necessary. You can fight us, but can you fight the United States?"

His words carried to the men behind the redhead. Something of the tenseness in the crowd was gone. Somehow,

those words had gone home. Metcalf wheeled, taking advantage of that momentary weakening.

"At ease!" he ordered. And then, turning back to the red-headed man, "Our surgeon will be here within a few minutes. I will see that the wounded have proper attention. You men disperse. Go to your homes. Tomorrow I'll hear your complaints. If possible I will adjust them. I—"

There was an interruption. Breaking through the ranks of the ranchmen and the miners, disheveled and panting, came a fat man at a run. He reached Metcalf, stopped, and his panted words were plainly heard by all.

"Land!" gasped Leige Nathan. "Llano Land, the man that killed Gunther! He's at the hotel!"

Wayne Metcalf was no fool. He struck instantly while the iron was hot. Here was opportunity. Metcalf seized it.

"Sergeant," he snapped, almost before Nathan's panting words were out, "take a squad and accompany this man! Arrest Llano Land and hold him!"

Dick Wadell had come down the steps. No coward now was Dick Wadell. "I'm deputy sheriff," he announced in Metcalf's ear. "I ought to—"

"Take the deputy with you, Sergeant!" ordered Metcalf.

"Yis, sorr," Cassidy acknowledged the order.

Metcalf turned to the red-headed man once more. "Now—" he began.

The red-headed man nodded. "Yo're the boss," he said slowly, "For now, anyhow. But, Lieutenant—"

"Yes?" said Metcalf.

"God help you if you don't do the right thing!" completed the redhead. And turning, he walked back to where

the mob, gathered together once more, was moving surlily toward the Saint George Hotel.

Cassidy, the squad of men at his heels, swept up Nathan and Wadell. At the double, they followed the crowd, caught it, pierced through it, and entered the Saint George.

* * *

Llano Land sat on the bed in his room at the Saint George. Opposite him, Dale Fallien occupied the single chair in the room. Llano, upon entering the hotel had asked for and secured the room that he had first occupied. He looked curiously at Fallien. Fallien was completing the telling of a story.

"So," concluded Fallien, "I picked him up an' loaded him in the back of his buckboard an' brought him to Ladoron to Mulligan's."

"And he was cut up," said Llano slowly "You didn't find anything?"

Fallien shook his head. "Not a thing," he corroborated. "Land, the talk about you is plumb ugly."

Llano grunted. His gray eyes gleamed as he looked at Fallien. "Take me out and hang me, I suppose they say," he suggested. "I've heard that sort of talk before."

"Where were you?" demanded Fallien bluntly. "You weren't around here."

"Who is asking?" Llano's eyes narrowed as he stared at the man in the chair. "Who are you, Fallien?"

Dale Fallien shrugged. "You'd be surprised," he answered.

"I'm open to surprises." Llano got up from the bed. "There's things happening outside, Fallien. Suppose we go look at them."

"If you show yore head outside the door, I wouldn't answer for what would happen." Fallien also arose from his seat. "Can't I get it to you that these folks think you killed Paul

Gunther an' that John Gunther was just a little tin god on wheels to most of 'em?"

"I've got it through my head," said Llano, moving across the room. "I still want to look. I always liked to see the soldiers."

Fallien took a step toward Llano, and stopped. He was behind Land, for Llano was at the door. Feet sounded loud in the corridor, thumping on the thick carpet. The sound drew near and metal rattled harshly. Llano took his hand away from the door.

"This room," announced Nathan's voice.

The door was thrust open. A grizzled, gray-haired, square-faced sergeant of cavalry stood in the opening. Behind him was Dick Wadell, and behind Wadell was a file of impassive faced troopers.

"Llano Land?" demanded the sergeant.

"I'm Llano Land," answered Llano.

"I got orders to arrest you." The sergeant took a step into the room.

As the soldier moved, Llano fell back a pace. Fallien, a little to his right, could see the dangerous glint in Llano's eyes. Dale Fallien stepped back a pace also.

"Who gave the orders?" Llano's voice was dangerously quiet. "Metcalf?"

"Lieutenant Metcalf," answered the sergeant. "Come on."

"If you'll wait a minute. I'll go outside where Metcalf can arrest me himself," suggested Llano. "His girl could see him do it and that would make him a hero. How about it, Sergeant?"

Fallien could tell, by the ring in Llano's voice, that there was trouble afoot. He had seen Llano Land in a reckless mood once before. Had seen Llano, on the night of his arrival in Ladron, throw a dare at the Grant's

two most dangerous men. Dale Fallien realized that Llano did not intend to be arrested.

"I've got orders," said the sergeant bluntly.

"Then enforce them!" Fallien could see Llano's muscles tense. "Come right in. Bring Wadell with you, and Mulligan can take us all out on his shutter!"

The sergeant's mouth opened slightly. He had not expected this. Fallien could see Wadell behind the sergeant. Wadell moved. Llano also noted the movement.

"Are you first, Wadell?" he queried coldly.

Wadell froze. The sergeant apparently collected his wits. "Come . . ." he began, and forged forward into the room.

Dale Fallien acted swiftly. A gun slid out from its holster beneath Fallien's arm, and the muzzle was jammed into Llano's back.

"Quiet!" commanded Fallien. "Search him, Sergeant!"

Llano froze. Cassidy's big fingers explored his body, removing a gun from the holster in his waistband. The pressure of Fallien's weapon did not relax. A thin, bitter grin twisted Llano's lips.

"So that's what you are, Fallien?" he said softly. "I wondered, a little. . . ."

CHAPTER XVII

Behind Bars

DISARMED, with a trooper on either side and with troopers before and behind him, Llano Land was escorted from the Saint George. There were men in the street, lining it, filling the sidewalks. They stared at Llano as he emerged, and a

mutter arose from their ranks. But they made no move took no action.

The troopers and Wadell put Llano in a cell.

Walking across the narrow confines of the room, Llano stood on tiptoe beside the window. So standing, he could see out to the side of the jail building, and by craning his neck he had a glimpse of a section of the sidewalk. Llano blew smoke through the bars.

A guard, coming along the short corridor before the cell, called Llano from the window.

"Stay away from there, you!" he commanded.

Llano walked back from the window and to the door. He grinned disarmingly at the guard. "I'd like to see a fellow," he announced casually. "There's a barber here in town I'd like to see."

The guard looked incredulous. "A barber?" he asked.

Llano nodded. "Mulligan," he answered, and then, searching in his mind for an excuse, he invented fiction. "Mulligan's got a razor of mine," he explained, running his hand over the stubble of beard that was on his jaw. "I gave it to him to sharpen. I'd like to get it."

"To cut your throat with?" The guard laughed.

"Nope. To shave with."

The guard shrugged. "I'll call the corporal," he said. "Mebbe he'll let you send for your barber."

Llano went back to the wall of the cell and squatted down. Presently the corporal presented his broad Irish face at the cell door.

"What's this about a razor?" he demanded.

Patiently, Llano repeated his fiction. The corporal shook his head. "You get no razor," he announced.

"But I'd like to see Mulligan, anyhow," persisted Llano. "I want to tell him what to do with it."

There was some argument, but persistence won. The corporal was Irish, and he loved a sport. Llano was not excited, he was not perturbed, apparently, although the corporal knew that Llano's case was desperate. The corporal had heard things from the men passing by the jail. . . .

Finally he agreed to send for Mulligan. Llano, relieved, rolled another cigarette. This was a thin chance—but it was a chance.

Time wore on. After perhaps half an hour, Llano heard a heavy voice at the jail door. He got up from where he squatted in his cell.

"Where's this jasper that says I've got his razor?" demanded Mulligan.

"Inside," answered the corporal. And Llano heard Mulligan's pegleg on the hard floor of the jail. Mulligan came to the front of the cell and stopped.

"I've got no razor of yours, you damned murderer!" announced Mulligan, wrath in his voice.

Llano had counted on that anger to bring Mulligan. Now he took the chance that the anger had made.

"Then Bill Westfall didn't bring it in from the Junta?" asked Llano casually.

"Nobody brought me a razor," began Mulligan wrathfully. "Nobody—huh?"

"A friend of mine named Mat McCarthy recommended you mighty highly," said Llano, low voiced. "Him an' Bill Westfall."

Mulligan dropped his tone. "Whist now!" said Mulligan. "What do you know about the Junta an' Mat McCarthy?"

"Nothing much." Llano also kept his voice lowered. "Except that I came from there this morning with

Westfall guiding me. McCarthy's a friend of mine. He'd like to know that I'm in jail."

Mulligan raised his voice again. "I haven't got your damned razor," he announced, and then, the tone soft again, "Westfall's at my place. I'll tell him."

"He'd better hurry," breathed Llano, and then, loudly, "I thought Bill had given it to you. Well, there's no harm done."

"Not to me," announced Mulligan, and turning, he stumped away.

FROM the time she had learned of

Paul Gunther's death, Rose Juell had stayed in the preacher's house. Crouched in the preacher's house, would be a better expression. . . .

Marie told her about Llano's arrest, and she decided to go to the jail. She asked permission to see Llano Land. This was refused by the corporal in charge of the guard.

Rose stood for a moment before the small building. Her mind was in a quandary. Then she became aware of men who still stood about the building, looking at her, and she heard some of the remarks that were made. These were not stifled. Rose heard a man say, "There's the woman they had trouble over." And realizing the conspicuous place she occupied, she hurried on up the street toward Ladron House, determined to see Metcalf and extract from him permission to visit Llano.

As she reached Ladron House, a heavy rainstorm came on in full fury, and the girl ran the last few steps, only to be stopped by a guard.

Rose Juell tried to pass the guard and was arguing with him when a window in the second story of the house was raised and Gwynne Rae looked out. Recognizing the girl she

saw standing before the soldier, Gwynne sent word out for Rose to be admitted. So it was not Lieutenant Metcalf, in charge of the cavalry troop, that met Rose in the great hall, but Gwynne Rae.

The two women faced each other. Rose just inside the door, her hair, face, and clothing rain wet, Gwynne further back in the room, haughty, beautiful, but distraught. The Army surgeon had attended her brother, as, indeed, he had attended the other wounded men, John Kinney included. Donald Rae was in no particular danger, but Gwynne was exceedingly worried about him. She looked questioningly at Rose Juell, and Rose returned that look.

It was Rose who broke the silence between them.

"I want to see the officer," she said.

"Lieutenant Metcalf?" Gwynne questioned. "He is busy with Mr. Cameron and Mr. Null."

"It's about Llano Land." Rose Juell's voice was hoarse. "He's in jail."

Gwynne slowly nodded her red-gold head.

"Llano didn't kill Paul Gunther!" burst forth Rose. "He didn't. There wasn't any reason for Llano to kill the preacher."

"The men say that he did," answered Gwynne. "Do you know that he had nothing to do with it?"

There was an eagerness in her voice that could not be misinterpreted. Rose looked steadily at the other woman.

"I know that he didn't," she said. "The Grant men killed Paul Gunther, not Llano Land!"

The words were a blow to Gwynne. Rose could see her recoil under them. Impulsively, the black-haired girl took a step forward.

"They'll hang Llano unless we get him out," she pleaded, striving to

make Gwynne Rae an ally in a common cause. "They'll lynch him!"

"But the soldiers. . . ." began Gwynne. "Lieutenant Mecalf won't—"

"He can't stop them," said Rose bitterly. "There are too many."

Gwynne made instant decision. "Come with me," she commanded. "We'll go to Wayne."

Rose, following Gwynne, noted the use of that first name. Somehow, it reassured the girl. . . .

With Gwynne preceding, the two women went to the door of Cameron's office. Stopping there, they could hear the men's deep voices beyond the door. Then Gwynne rapped sharply and the voices ceased.

Cameron opened the door and stood on the threshold.

"Gwynne, my dear!" he exclaimed.

"I want to speak to Wayne," announced Gwynne Rae imperiously, "I want—"

Metcalf came to the door and, as Cameron stood aside, walked through and joined the two women. Metcalf's face was tired and his eyes were troubled.

"Llano Land, Wayne," said Gwynne. "This girl says that he's in danger. That he didn't kill Paul Gunther and that the men here in town will take him out and hang him."

Metcalf looked at Rose Juell. "What information do you have?" he asked bluntly. "Do you wish to make an alibi for Land?"

Under the implication of that question Rose Juell paled. "I—" she began.

"Was he with you?" asked Metcalf.

"No. . . ." The words came slowly. Then, in a torrent, "But Llano didn't kill Paul Gunther. Llano had no reason. He—"

Metcalf turned. "I'm sorry," he interrupted coldly. "I will afford Mr.

Land every protection. You need not worry about his being lynched."

His tired eyes sought Gwynne's face. Gwynne was flushed.

"If I—" she commenced.

"I'm sorry, Gwynne," said Metcalf, with utter finality.

He nodded to the two women and stepped back through the door. Wayne Metcalf was under pressure and he had begun to suspect that he was being made a tool, a catspaw for suave Arthur Cameron and suave Kent Null. He had, he realized, overstepped his authority by moving from Bridger at the request of the manager of the Duro Grant. He had been better off to send a dispatch rider to San Felice and await orders from his commanding officer. But here he was, and now he must make the best of it.

Gwynne hurried after the officer, but Rose Juell turned away, her head lowered. She had recognized the finality in Metcalf's voice.

Cameron stopped her. "Rose," he called softly.

Gwynne had already gone into the office, and Cameron and Rose Juell were alone. "Perhaps I can help," suggested Cameron, standing beside the dark-haired girl.

Rose Juell looked up quickly. "You?" she questioned.

Cameron nodded, and his smile was crooked and leering on his lips. "If you would be friends with me, I hardly see how I can refuse you anything," he said softly.

Rose Juell lowered her eyes again. She was silent for perhaps a minute. Gwynne Rae's voice, raised in anger, came through the office door.

"Tonight," said Rose Juell. "I will be at Paul Gunther's house tonight. I'll meet you, there."

Cameron took a quick breath. "And



Llano Land will be out of jail tonight," he promised.

Gwynne Rae came through the door, head erect, cheeks flaming. She swept past Cameron and spoke imperiously to Rose. "Come!"

Rose followed her, head still lowered. Cameron watched them go. Then, with a jerk, he turned and went back into the office.

In the hall, Gwynne paused. "You must come with me," she said. "It is raining and we must talk. Isn't there something that we can do?"

Rose looked at Gwynne, saw the blue eyes, the red-gold hair, the fresh

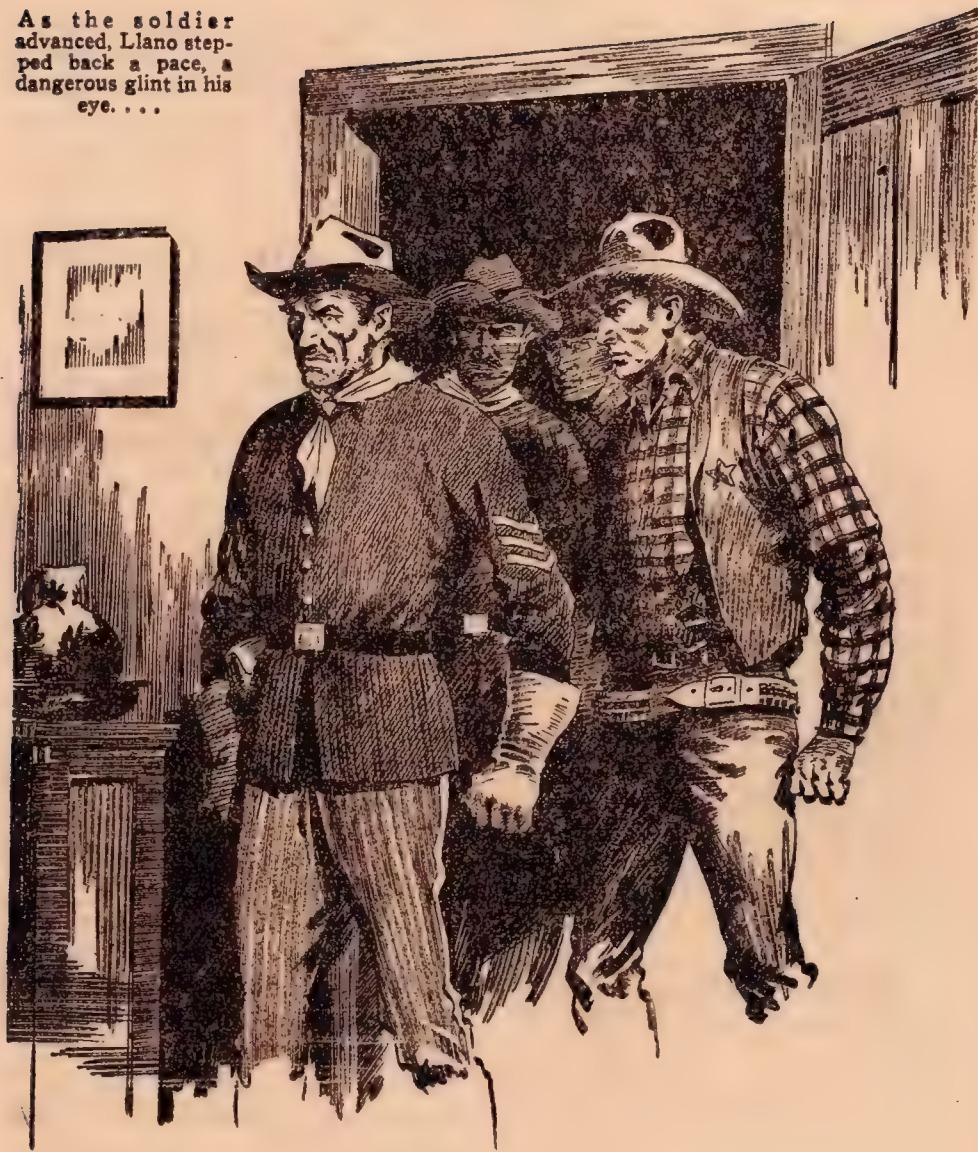
firm lips and the color ebbing from the girl's cheeks.

"I've done what I can," said Rose Juell wearily. "I'll go now."

She walked toward the door, pushing aside the hand with which Gwynne tried to detain her. Tugging at the heavy door, she opened it and passed through. And then, unmindful of the rain, she went on down the street. Through store windows and from the sheltering porches of buildings men marked her progress and commented, but Rose Juell did not raise her head.

Mulligan, the barber, was in the Exchange Saloon when Rose Juell

As the soldier advanced, Llano stepped back a pace, a dangerous glint in his eye. . . .



passed. Mulligan heard the men at the door speak, but paid no heed to what they said. Mulligan was drinking his third glass of whisky. Beside him, Dick Wadell also raised a glass.

"Here's to crime," toasted Wadell, and he drank of the mixture, whisky, water and ice that the glass contained. He set it back on the bar.

Mulligan tossed down his straight

whisky and called out for another.

"When's Gunther goin' to be buried?" asked the bartender as he filled Mulligan's glass again.

Mulligan shrugged. "Don't know," he answered.

"How you keepin' him?" the bartender asked curiously.

Mulligan eyed Dick Wadell's glass with the lump of ice slowly melting

in it. "On ice," grunted Mulligan. "Didn't you see him in the ice-house when you come to get yore ice this mornin'?"

"Nope," said the bartender. "On ice, huh?"

Dick Wadell looked at his glass. He, too, saw the lump of ice. "Damn you!" He swore furiously at Mulligan. "Damn you, Mulligan! Why didn't you—"

"To hell with you, Wadell," answered Mulligan, and lifted his glass. "To hell with you an' all yore kind."

The drink went down and Dick Wadell recoiled a step from the peg-legged man. There was a razor, a barber's tool, bright and sharp, in Mulligan's left hand. Wadell took another step back.

It was his last. . . .

Out in the street, the rain beat down. Up in the hills the clouds hung low and spilled their moisture. On the trail west of Ladron, Bill Westfall rode a horse and cursed the rain. The feet of Westfall's mount slid on the treacherous trail and the horse lurched. Westfall swore again, and rode steadily on, head bowed against the storm, the rain running in rivulets from his hat brim.

DALE FALLIEN paced gloomily back and forth across his bedroom in the Saint George while rain splattered against the windows.

"The danged fool wanted to fight," he muttered, half aloud. "He'd of been killed if— Well, what the devil?"

Ceasing his restless pacing at last, Fallien picked up his hat from the bed. Pulling it down on his head, he walked out of his room.

In the lobby of the hotel, Nathan hovered anxiously behind the desk and booted men stood, water dripping from their hats and making little pools

on the carpet. Fallien paused beside the lobby door. He had recognized one of these men. There, doing most of the talking, his hat pushed far back on his head, was Park Frazier.

"Kinney's all right," stated Frazier. "That Army doctor fixed him up. They got him an' the others in a room at Ladron House. There's a guard over him but they let his wife come in to see him an' she's with him now."

"What are we waitin' for?" demanded a bushy-whiskered man. "Why—"

"We're waitin' for Greybull," answered Frazier. "He's comin' here as soon as he gets done with Metcalf. Then we'll decide what there is to do."

The busy-whiskered man spat, and tobacco juice splashed on the carpet. Nathan winced. The red-headed man went on: "There's nough miners an' teamers here along with us to take Ladron House," he commented casually. "But I got to hand it to that soldier boy. He's smart, he is."

Fallien leaned back against the wall beside the door he had just entered, and watched the red-headed man. There was a lean cleverness about the redhead's face.

Nathan came around the corner of the desk and, crossing the room, came to Fallien's side.

"Frazier's on the warpath," he whispered, nodding toward the red-head. "He's stirring things up."

Fallien nodded. Dale Fallien wished that Frazier was far away. He was dangerous.

The lobby door opened and Pat Greybull, accompanied by two or three others, came in. Greybull went directly to Frazier, and stopped.

"Well?" drawled Frazier.

Greybull shrugged. There was a beaten look about the mine operator

from Marthastown. "They got us handcuffed," he said slowly. "Cameron made me a proposition. We can pay fifty per cent of our gross output to the Grant. The rest belongs to us, after we take out operatin' expenses. A man can't come out right on that!"

The red-headed Frazier laughed a little, scornfully. "But you'll take it," he jeered.

Greybull looked up from beneath bushy eyebrows. "There's nothin' else to do," he agreed hopelessly.

"Mebbe not for you," said Frazier, "but what about us on the Grant? If we pay rent we acknowledge that they own our places. Then the next thing they move us out."

Silence followed that, and then the redhead spoke again. "I never thought you'd knuckle under to 'em, Greybull."

"I ain't knucklin' under." Greybull's voice was hoarse. "I've got a big investment, there, at Marthastown, an'—"

"An' the soldiers have got you tied up," completed Frazier. "The soldiers ain't goin' to be here always, Pat."

"What . . ." began Greybull.

"I mean that this Metcalf moved over here at the askin' of the Grant people," answered Frazier bluntly. "Pretty soon he'll get word from the south to go on home to Bridger an' tend to his knittin'."

"An' then what?" Greybull was eager.

"Why then," Frazier drawled, "we can fight in the courts. You made a lot of money out of Marthastown, Pat."

"Some," agreed Greybull. "What do you plan, Park?"

Park Frazier grinned thinly. "I got no plan," he replied. "The thing is, do we let the Grant get away with this? We were all set this mornin' an' the cavalry come. They got the jump on us. They arrested this Grant

killer, Land. Here he is, peaceful in jail out of the rain an' safe as if he was in church. We goin' to stand for that, Pat?"

GREYBULL looked around the room.

He saw Fallien and Nathan against the wall. He looked at the men with Frazier, and at his own companions. "Let's get out where we can talk," he said abruptly. "Come on, Park."

Frazier also glanced around the lobby. He shrugged his shoulders, nodded his agreement, and followed Greybull toward the door. The others trooped after him.

When they were gone, Nathan licked his thick lips. "It looks like trouble for Llano Land," he announced with unction. "Damn preacher killer."

Fallien looked at the hotel proprietor. "You sure like to see the other man in grief," he remarked slowly. "Damn you, Nathan! You ain't fit to associate with a hog!"

With these words, Fallien moved, taking his long length across the lobby and out of the door. For a moment he stood on the porch, scanning the gray sky and the street. The rain still fell and the street was almost empty. Still, there were a few men about. A cavalry trooper in a poncho stood before the door of the jail. At Ladron House the troops had sought shelter in the stable, but a sentinel walked past. Other poncho-protected soldiers were in evidence along the street, and opposite the jail there were two or three men under the porch of a store. They were watching the jail, alert unofficial guards.

For a moment Fallien stood on the porch of the Saint George. Then, pulling down his hatbrim, he stepped out into the rain. As he walked down the street, someone lit a lamp in a store. It was late afternoon. Within

an hour, dusk would be settling down.

Fallien walked steadily. He passed the jail, went by stores and houses and the Exchange Saloon. Well down the street, near the church, he stopped before a square adobe house and, knocking on the door, waited for an answer. This was Paul Gunther's house.

Fallien's knock was answered. Maria came to the door and peered out. In Spanish, Fallien asked to see Rose Juell. Maria stood aside and the tall man entered. The woman bustled away and, hat in hand, Fallien waited.

He stood for perhaps fifteen minutes before Rose Juell came. There was a strange softness about the dark-haired woman as she came through the door, stopped, and stood looking at her visitor.

Fallien nodded to her, his face grave.

"I wanted to see you," he said.

Rose Juell examined Fallien's face. She gestured toward a chair. "Won't you sit down?" she invited.

Fallien sat down. Rose remained poised beside the door.

"I want to ask you about Gunther," announced Fallien. "You were here when Gunther left that day?"

Rose nodded.

"Did he say anything about any trouble?" asked Fallien.

The woman shook her head. "He did not."

Fallien paused. "Had he an' Llano Land had any trouble over you?" he questioned bluntly.

A slow flush spread over Rose Juell's pale cheeks. "No," she answered. "Llano Land and Paul Gunther had never talked to each other."

"Yo're sure of that?" persisted Fallien.

"Sure."

"The talk is that they'd quarreled over you," insisted Fallien.

"They had not!" Rose's head was lifted defiantly.

Fallien mused a moment. "What did Gunther say when he left here that day?" he asked.

"He said that he was going to Marthastown, and that was all."

Fallien looked at the damp spots on his knees. His hands fumbled in the pockets of his vest and he produced papers and a sack of tobacco. Deliberately he twisted a cigarette, lit it, and took a deep inhalation.

Surprise of a sudden covered his face. He took the cigarette from his lips and stared at it. Rose Juell sniffed the smoke in the air.

"What—?" began Fallien.

"Marijuana!" exclaimed Rose Juell excitedly.

Fallien's hand went to his pockets again. He brought forth another sack of tobacco. The tall man looked at the two small oblongs of muslin.

"I got that sack of tobacco when I found Paul Gunther," said Fallien. "It was on the ground beside him."

Rose Juell moved swiftly from the door. She reached Fallien's side and bent down, looking at the two sacks. "Marijuana!" she repeated. "I—"

Fallien let the sacks fall to the floor. His hand shot up and caught Rose Juell by the wrist. "What do you know?" he demanded savagely.

Rose's face was pallid. "Huerta," she answered, low-voiced. "Huerta smokes marijuana."

"Well?" snapped Fallien.

The woman's voice raised. "Huerta and Flaco!" she said. "They killed Paul Gunther! Huerta smokes marijuana. He mixes it with tobacco. That's his sack!" She pointed to the muslin bag on the floor.

Fallien released his hold on the girl's wrist. He scooped up the tobacco sack from the floor, and

holding it securely, got to his feet.

"You stay here," he commanded. "Right here. Don't leave the house. I'll be back."

He stepped toward the door, pulling on his hat as he moved. At the door, he turned. "Now stay here, mind!" he ordered. Opening the door, he walked into the rain.

Rose Juell stood beside the chair that Fallien had occupied. The room was gray, almost dark. She stared at the door and, slowly, a look of hope came to her face.

She turned. Maria, carrying a lamp, came into the room.

"It stop rainin'," announced Maria. "Jus' sprinkling. I go home now."

She put the lamp on the table. There was a candle already on the table, and a saucer of matches beside it. Maria shrugged and, turning, went out the way she had come.

CHAPTER XVIII

Man With the Star

DALE FALLIEN, leaving Gunther's house, walked rapidly up the street. When he reached the jail, he halted and turned to enter. The guard at the door barred his way, and Fallien, opening his coat, displayed a small gold badge pinned to his vest.

"Deputy marshal," snapped Fallien. "I want to see Land!"

The guard called his corporal, and that worthy, after brief questions, let Fallien enter. The corporal had dealt with United States marshals before.

Fallien followed the corporal down the short corridor, and waited until the uniformed man had unlocked the cell and stood back. Fallien stepped into the cell. He stood, a tall, gaunt man, his shadow long and wraithlike before him.

"Hello, Land," he said quietly. As he entered the cell, the door clanged shut and the corporal walked back along the corridor.

"I've been to see Rose Juell," began Fallien. "She says that you an' Gunther never quarreled, that you'd never spoke. How about it?"

"We never did," Llano said from the shadows. "I'd seen Gunther once or twice, an' that was all. But what's it to you, Fallien?"

"Plenty," answered the tall man. "I—what's that?"

From somewhere outside the jail, a shot sounded. There was a faint, high-pitched yelling, and then came a fusillade of shots, that seemingly were nearer.

"I reckon that's a start for me." There was a calm fatality in Llano's voice. "You'd better get out, Fallien."

Fallien had turned. He was looking out of the bars of the door. In the corridor, the lantern burned. The corporal and the trooper had gone out, evidently to investigate the disturbance.

Fallien wheeled back. "They're goin' to make a try for you," he stated bluntly. "I heard enough to know that. Park Frazier was in the Saint George talkin' to Greybull. Frazier is tryin' to get the miners to throw in with the ranchers. If he can get Greybull an' his bunch to help lynch you, they'll both be tarred with the same stick an' Greybull's bunch will have to stay with 'em. I figured that."

"That'll be pleasant for me," drawled Llano.

Outside the jail, there was confusion. Men were calling, moving swiftly toward a common focal point. The calls, at first distinct, now were fainter. Again shots sounded, muffled by the drizzling rain.

"You better get goin', Fallien."

"I'm goin' to get you out of here," said Fallien.

Feet sounded in the corridor. A man wearing a campaign hat and a poncho came down the passage, stopped in front of the cell door. A key grated in the lock. Fallien took a step forward as the cell door opened.

"I—" he began.

Something glittered in the hand of the man under the poncho. There was the dull sound of a blow. Fallien lurched and went down. From the corridor came Mat McCarthy's deep voice, a fat chuckle in it.

"Git' up an' come out of there, Llano," he commanded. "Your horses are out back. Get goin'."

* * *

Llano was out of the shadows. Bending down over Fallien, he thrust an exploring hand under the man's coat. That blow that McCarthy had struck had been a hard one, but Fallien's heart beat strongly. Something pressed against Llano's hand and he jerked the coat back. There, plain in the bright lantern light, glowed the gold badge.

"A marshal!" exclaimed McCarthy, who now was also bending over the prone Fallien.

"We got to take him with us," snapped Llano.

McCarthy swore. "Not by a damn sight! We leave him right here."

"We got to take him." The urgency in Llano's voice overrode McCarthy's protest.

"Quick, then!" McCarthy growled. And bending, he heaved Fallien up. Llano caught the man's other side and helped support him. Two men, the Savoy, were coming along the little corridor. They carried a third. Llano saw the broad Irish face of the corporal. The corporal was out, cold. Unceremoniously the two Savoy

dumped the man into Llano's cell. One of them grinned at Llano.

"Think we'd forgot you, fellow?" he asked.

The other Savoy, wordless, thrust out a hand. There was a big Army Colt in the hand and Llano took the gun, shoving it down into his waistband. "Figured you'd need that," grunted the Savoy.

"Git them other two in here," ordered McCarthy, briskly. "Come on, Llano."

The Savoy went out the door. Llano and McCarthy, carrying Fallien between them, followed. Fallien's feet dragged on the floor.

Outside, the Savoy was picking up another soldier, lugging him toward the jail door. Alert at a corner of the building stood Shorty Hamarick, a gun in his hand.

"Who's that?" he demanded as Llano and McCarthy with their burden, came abreast.

"Friend of Llano's," McCarthy answered mirthlessly.

"Bill an' Mulligan are puttin' on a regular war." Hamarick was with his leader, going around the corner of the jail. "We got a couple of more minutes."

"Throw this jasper on a horse," growled McCarthy.

There were horses behind the jail. In wonder Llano recognized his own two horses, yellow Jigger and gray Singleshot. Singleshot was saddled, and there was a pack and saddle on Jigger.

McCarthy, heaving Fallien up so that he lay across the pack, answered Llano's unspoken question.

"Stole 'em out of the hotel barn," he grunted. "Raided yore room an' tied Nathan up tighter'n a bull in fly time. Put the barn boy in the loft an' locked it. Push!"

Llano pushed. Fallien came to rest across the pack. McCarthy made rapid movements with a rope. The two Savoy's came around the corner of the jail, their chuckles deep in their throats.

"Threwed them yeller laigs in yore cell, Land," chuckled one of the twins. "Any objections?"

Llano climbed his saddle. "Not a one," he answered.

The Savoy's mounted. Hamarick was already astride his horse. McCarthy had swung into the saddle.

"Come on," ordered McCarthy. And he led the way into the darkness and the rain.

The feet of the horses splashed through puddles of water. Behind them they could hear men calling to each other. A steady pound of hoofs showed where a cavalry patrol was going to the scene of the disturbance. McCarthy turned in his saddle.

"That was a smart dodge you played," he commended Llano. "Gettin' Mulligan. Mulligan had Bill Westfall at his place. He started Bill out right away. Bill come a-runnin'. When he told us what had happened, we saddled up an' started to town. Mulligan an' Bill staged a sham battle for 'em while the rest of us went to work. Pretty good huh, Llano?"

McCarthy was well pleased with himself. His tone of voice told that. Even then, he was not so pleased as Llano Land. Llano said so. "It was better than pretty good, Mat," he answered. "I won't forget it."

"Shuel" grunted McCarthy, "you'd of done the same."

Llano peered through the darkness. "Where are we going?"

"To a shack out of town a piece," McCarthy answered. "Up north about six miles. Bill's goin' to meet us there.

Then we can decide what to do. Why'd you bring this jasper along, Llano?"

"Because he's a deputy marshal," Llano explained.

"I ain't lost no marshals," McCarthy grunted.

"An' we aren't going to lose this



one." Llano's voice was firm. "He fits our hand, Mat."

"Mebbe." McCarthy was doubtful.

"Let's get on to that shack and we'll see," said Llano Land.

BACK in Paul Gunther's house, Rose Juell waited endlessly. She waited until the wick of the lamp, unevenly trimmed, sent black smoke to soot the side of the chimney, until the small supply of kerosene in the bowl was gone and the lamp flickered and went out. She did not light the candle that stood beside the lamp, but sat there in the dark, listening for Dale Fallien's footsteps and his knock on the door.

The first flurry of shots and the yells brought her to her feet, her hands pressed against her breast and her eyes wide. The shots died away, and still she waited. And then there were

footsteps and a soft knock sounded at the door.

Still with her hand against her breast, Rose Juell went to the door. The knock was repeated.

There was something about that knock, some quality of stealth in the soft tattoo of knockles that frightened Rose Juell. She had expected Fallien. Now, with a sudden flood of terrorizing recollections, she remembered her promise to Arthur Cameon. Her voice was faint as she spoke.

"Who?" called Rose Juell.

"It's Cameron, Rose," came the soft answer.

Rose Juell's hand fluttered at her breast.

"Let me in," demanded Cameron.

Rose could almost feel his body pressing against the door. Fear filled her, suddenly. A terror of the man outside stifled her. "No!" she gasped. "No! No!" Suddenly she was afraid of him.

The bolted door creaked as Cameron applied pressure. Rose turned as if to run. But there was nowhere to go. The man outside was losing his temper. Hot rage, flamed by passion, was in his voice. "Damn you, Rose! Let me in!"

The girl did not answer, could not answer, and again the door creaked as Cameron, furious, thrust against it.

Then, abruptly, the creaking ceased. There was a long period of silence, and then came steps pounding on the board walk outside the house—steps that receded, then finally died away.

Rose Juell collapsed beside the door. For a while she lay there. At last, scrambling to her feet, she went to the room that Paul Gunther had given her, and there began to collect her scanty possessions, the few things that the kindly minister had salvaged from her

room when she had fled to him for shelter.

* * *

Arthur Cameron, flinging away from Paul Gunther's house, was white with anger. He stamped his way up the street, making for Ladron House. Then suddenly, before him, there was a commotion and a little crowd. Pushing his way into the crowd, he saw that it was at the jail. There were voices, hot and angry, and a man at the door, a man in uniform was berating someone inside.

Cameron caught words and sentences. His hot anger suddenly cooled. The man at the door was Sergeant Cassidy, and he was speaking to a trooper.

"A fine guard you are!" roared Cassidy. "Three of you, and soldiers down the street, an' you let him get away! A nice time I'll have reportin' to the Lieutenant. This'll be a general court for you."

Cameron, moving close, caught at Cassidy's sleeve. The sergeant turned. "What happened?" demanded Cameron.

Cassidy recognized his questioner. Cameron was an important man. The sergeant answered. "Land's gone," he said. "A little bunch of men jumped the guards an' took him out. Fine soldiers they are! Fine . . ." Cassidy stopped. The man he addressed was gone. Cameron had turned and walked swiftly away.

He did not go to Ladron House. The rage of Rose Juell's treatment of him was still upon him but it was a cold rage now. Llano Land was gone and Rose Juell had refused to talk to him. Arthur Cameron craved revenge. He went across the rain-wet street and entered the Exchange.

"Where's Flaco?" he demanded of the bartender.

The bartender nodded his head toward a booth. "In there," he said. "Him an' Huerta are soakin' it up."

But Cameron did not wait for the bartender's observations. He walked to the booth indicated and found there the men he sought. They started to rise when they saw him but Cameron, stepping into the booth, slipped into a chair.

"I'm looking for you," he announced briefly.

Huerta, drunk, grunted, "Si."

Flaco's eyes widened.

"I understand," said Cameron slowly and distinctly, planting his words in whiskey-soaked brains, "That Rose Juell is going to talk to the officer up at Ladron House. She has some things to tell him about you."

Flaco's eyes were wider than ever. Cameron smiled mirthlessly, licked his lips. Thick lips they were, curved and full and sensuous. "It would be too bad if she did," said Cameron.

"Where is she?" grunted Flaco.

"In Paul Gunther's house," answered Cameron "Alone."

He got up then, looked first at Flaco and then at Huerta—and without another word, he stepped out of the booth and was gone.

"Damn her," Flaco snarled. "Damn her! She'll tell, will she?" Reaching across the table, he caught Huerta's elbow. "You know what that means?" he demanded.

Huerta, head lolling, came erect in his chair. "Huh?" he began.

"Get up!" snarled Flaco. "She'll talk, will she? She's alone, is she?"

Huerta, stumbling and awkward, followed Flaco suddenly out of the booth. . . .

At Paul Gunthers House, Rose Juell had completed her hasty packing. She had taken the little bag of her possessions and was ready to go. There

was one place and only one place where she believed she would be free from danger. That place was with Gwynne Rae.

As she stood beside the door, the bolt drawn back and her hand on the knob, she heard feet on the walk, stumbling feet and feet that struck firmly. She paused, there. Then the knob turned under her hand, and the door was thrust against her, sending her reeling back, and the black bulk of men filled the doorway.

Rose Juell screamed once and then again, and then her hands beat futilely against flesh and she went down.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Null Decides

IN LADRON HOUSE, Gwynne Rae sat restlessly. Wayne Metcalf, sitting beside her with both her hands imprisoned in his, sensed that reslessness and strove to overcome it. He tried to talk to the girl, but she made no response. Finally Metcalf ceased his attempts at light conversation and spoke of the thing that was uppermost in Gwynne Rae's mind.

"I could not do what you asked today, Gwynne," he said. "I could not free Llano Land. The man is arrested for murder. If I had freed him, I would have brought down the mob on Ladron House. Men would have been killed."

"The girl said that Llano didn't kill Gunther," said Gwynne, referring to Rose Juell. "I don't believe he did. He saved my life. I can't let him lie there in jail."

"What is Land to you?" demanded Metcalf with a sudden flame of jealously. "What is your interest in him, Gwynne?"

"He saved my life," Gwynne re-

peated. "He—I can't explain it, Wayne."

Metcalf bent forward. "Does he mean a great deal to you, Gwynne?" he questioned. "Does he mean . . ." The young officer broke off his sentence helplessly.

Gwynne Rae tried to put her thoughts, her feelings, into words. "You wouldn't understand, Wayne," she said. "He is so strong, so—so much a man. He wouldn't use a knife in the dark. He wouldn't strike a man down without warning. That girl must have some knowledge that would clear him. Surely she must know something, or she wouldn't have come here."

Metcalf rose to his feet. "I'll go to see her," he announced decisively. "I'll go tonight, Gwynne, if it means that much to you. I'll find out what she knows."

Gwynne Rae also came to her feet. "I'll go with you," she announced in a tone that brooked no objection. "Wait until I get my cape, Wayne."

Leaving the officer, she hurried to the stairs. As she mounted them, she looked back and smiled a little, tremulously. Wayne Metcalf's reward was in that smile, but he did not see it. He stood, scuffing the thick rug with one booted foot, his head down, his eyes lowered. It seemed to Wayne Metcalf at that moment that his world had crumbled about him. He believed, truly, that Gwynne Rae loved Llano Land.

While he waited for the girl to reappear, there was a knock at the door. A servant answered the knock and as the door opened the servant was thrust aside. Cassidy, his face red, anger in his eyes, came into Ladron House. The sergeant saluted his officer and blurted out words.

"The prisoner's escaped, sir," he announced. "A little bunch of men came

an' took him out of jail. They locked the guard in his cell an' he's gone."

"What?" snapped Metcalf.

"Yis, sorr," said Cassidy.

Wayne Metcalf snatched up his hat from where it lay. Gwynne Rae and his promise was forgotten. Here was a thing that demanded his immediate attention. "We'll see about this, Sergeant," he said dangerously. "We'll go to the jail first."

So it was that Gwynne Rae, her cape about her, found the hall vacant when she descended the stairs. The man that answered her pull on the bell cord was voluble. A soldier had come and spoken to the officer and they had gone out together in a hurry. He did not know where. He did not know why. Gwynne Rae's cheeks flushed with anger.

"I am going out, Carlos," she announced, and despite Carlos' expostulation, swept to the door. Carlos, still objecting, opened the door for her, and Gwynne went out into the rainy night.

SHE knew where Paul Gunther's house was. Avoiding the main street where lights flashed and men moved, she turned the corner of Ladron House and chose another way. Down a dark street she went, now walking in mud, now stepping into a puddle, until, well past the main portion of the town, she turned again and went back to the central street. On down it she went until she came to an adobe house.

There she paused. The door of the adobe was a black cavity in the lighter blackness of the wall. Some premonition, some dreadful hint of evil, seemed to come through that open doorway.

Gwynne Rae steeled herself and stepped to the opening. Her voice trembled as she spoke.

"Rose! Rose!"

For a moment there was no answer and then from within the door, came a groan.

It took courage for Gwynne Rae to step through that door. It took more than courage for her extended hands to grope through the darkness and find a table. The groping hands found more. They found a lamp on the table and matches in a dish. A match flamed and touched the wick of the lamp but the wick would not light.

Again, behind Gwynne Rae, came that feeble groan, urging her to desperation. A tin candlestick rattled under her hand, and again a match flamed, and following it came a feeble yellow glow that grew as the candle wick ignited. Holding that candlestick, Gwynne Rae turned.

Rose Juell lay on the floor behind the door, and a dark ugly stain spread from Rose toward the center of the room.

Gwynne Rae gave a little scream. The candlestick trembled and almost fell from her hand. Then, nerving herself, she went to the girl on the floor. She knelt and, placing the candlestick beside her, bent over Rose Juell.

"Rose . . . !" she cried softly. "Rose Juell . . . !"

Rose Juell's eyes opened. Great dark eyes that were soft with suffering and hurt. Rose Juell's lips moved and, bending close, Gwynne caught the words that were formed.

"Llano?"

There were tears in Gwynne Rae's eyes. "Who did this, Rose? Who?"

But the lips were moving again. Again Gwynne bent to catch the words. "Tell Llano . . . Flaco . . . killed . . . Ames."

"I'll tell him," promised Gwynne. "But I must get you out of here. I'll take you—"

Rose Juell's head moved. Her voice

was suddenly strong and firm and sweet. "I love you, Llano," she said.

Then the dark head lolled limply, and Rose Juell's body relaxed.

"I'll get you out of here," promised Gwynne Rae again. "I'll—" she stopped, realizing that Rose Juell was gone from the room where the candle flickered with the draft through the door.

For a little time, Gwynne Rae knelt beside the dead girl on the floor. Oddly, she was not afraid. There was nothing here of which to be afraid. All that was evil had been done and now was gone. There remained only this woman, wild, fierce, perhaps, but surely not evil. Gwynne Rae could feel that Rose Juell had not been evil.

Gathering herself, the girl from the big house arose. She stepped away from the body and as she moved through the door the candle guttered in its waxen cup and the wind of her passing stifled it. Gwynne Rae went out of a house as black as when she had entered.

She hurried away from Paul Gunther's up the street, her footsteps rapid at first, and then as she added distance becoming more rapid until she was almost running. There was no effort now to avoid the lighted street with the men milling on it. The drizzle of rain was wet on her face, and the lamps flickered through wet panes of glass and shone on her cheeks. She went on. The men she passed stared after her curiously, some of them recognizing the great lady from Ladron House. One or two moved as if to follow her, but refrained.

AT Ladron House, Gwynne used the knocker and was admitted. The big hall was dark, and gloomy shadows hung in it, but there was a fire in the fireplace at the further end of the room and it glowed cheerfully. A man arose

from a chair beside that fireplace and moved forward toward Gwynne. It was Kent Null.

Gwynne, seeing the lawyer, stopped. Her voice was sharp as she asked a question. "Is Wayne here?"

Null shook his head. "Your friend the lieutenant," he said, humor in his voice, "is out on business at present. It seems that his prisoner escaped after locking the guard in his cell. Wayne is looking for him."

"You mean Llano Land?" Gwynne's question was direct.

"I mean Llano Land," Null nodded. "He was not as friendless as he seemed." He hesitated for a moment, and then went on, cheerfully, "I have a surprise for you, Gwynne. I am leaving."

Gwynne's eyes were sharp as she looked at the man. Null was nonchalant, even debonair. His dress, as always, was immaculate, his carriage jaunty.

"Why?" asked Gwynne.

Null shrugged. "For good and sufficient reasons," he said.

The girl took a quick step forward. "I have been to Paul Gunther's," she said, her voice vibrant. "Rose Juell is there, Kent. She has been killed!"

Null took a step back. His face, already pale, became even more so, and the ruddy light of the fire could not give his cheeks color. "Killed?" he echoed.

A sudden flux of feeling swept Gwynne Rae. She had held herself, been brave when it was difficult to be brave. Now that bravery was gone. A long sob shook her and then another.

Suddenly Kent Null's arms were about her shaking shoulders and her head was against his chest while one of the man's long, fine hands stroked her hair. Through her sobs Gwynne Rae tried to tell Null what she had

seen, what had happened. The words were disjointed, garbled. Null tried to soothe her, tried to comfort her. His words were soft and reassuring.

"Now, Gwynne. Now, girl. You couldn't help it. You couldn't help her."

The sobs continued. A serving-woman, Gwynne's maid, aroused by the sobs from below, showed her dark face from the banister of the stair. Null nodded to her, and the woman came on down the stairs. Suddenly Null realized that he had taken the wrong tack, that this sobbing girl in his arms did not desire soothing words but rather promises of vengeance.

Null spoke sharply. "Gwynne!"

The girl raised her head. She stifled a sob at its beginning and looked at Null. There was color now, in Null's face, color and something else, something that Gwynne had never seen on that smooth countenance.

"I'll look after things, Gwynne," promised Null grimly. "I'll do what I can. Metcalf is after Llano Land, but I'll see him the moment he comes back. In the meantime . . ." Null let the threat die unfinished.

There was satisfaction to Gwynne in the man's voice, in the sudden arousing that stirred him, but she caught at the last words: Llano Land.

"Llano?" questioned Gwynne. "You say . . .?"

"I say that he broke jail," answered Null. "I say that his friends came for him and took him out. He is somewhere safe. Metcalf won't find him."

Gwynne Rae's eyes lighted. The thing Null had told her made her heart for an instant beat wildly. Then she remembered. She remembered Rose Juell and the message Rose had given her and the last words Rose had spoken.

Something of that recollection must

have shown in her face . . . Null turned away.

"You go with Elisa," he commanded. "I must look after things." His voice had lost its ring, and the fire was gone from his face. Gwynne Rae turned away. Elisa, the serving-woman, put her hand on the girl's arm. Gwynne allowed herself to be led toward the stairs.

In her room, as her woman removed wet garments and clucked her tongue at the condition of her mistress' hair and clothing.

"Elisa," she said, and her voice was strong. "I must see Lieutenant Metcalf as soon as he comes back. I must dress. Bring me dry clothes and my black dress."

Down in the great hall, standing in front of the fireplace, Kent Null spread his legs wide and locked his hands behind him. His head, tipped forward, was vulture-like. His mouth was harsh, and his aquiline nose was a jutting beak. For a while he stood there. Then, thoughtfully, he unlocked his hands and with the long tapering fingers of the right hand, explored a pocket in his figured vest. The fingers brought a weapon from that pocket, a short, stubby, double-barreled derringer, no less deadly because it lacked length. Null broke the gun and looked at the dully gleaming copper of the cartridges in the barrels. Then he laughed—a short, harsh bark without mirth.

"And I am going away," mused Null, half aloud. "I am going to leave this ship like any other rat!" Again came that harsh, mirthless laugh. Null turned sharp on a heel.

"Arthur, my friend," said Kent Null, cradling the derringer, "you've gone too far with this. Kent Null must be the next name on your list!"

As he spoke, he strode across the

room and through a door and then down a semi-dark passage. Before the door of Cameron's office he paused as though to nerve himself. Then he thrust the door open and, derringer lifted, stepped through.

The office was empty. There was a lamp on the desk, lighted and burning steadily. A bottle and glasses were set out waiting to be used. The chair was turned away from the desk, inviting a man to slip into it. And that was all. Arthur Cameron was absent.

Null stood a moment, the derringer raised. Then again he laughed bitterly. "You make it easy for me, Arthur," he said to the absent Cameron.

He put the derringer back into his vest pocket and hesitated a moment. Then the harsh lines of his face softened. He stepped across, and taking the bottle and the glass, poured himself a drink.

"I'd have killed you, Arthur," he said. "I'd have killed you if it were necessary. But it isn't necessary." He tossed down the drink.

For a moment after he stood there, eyeing the bottle. His hand went out slowly, took the bottle, and again the liquor gurgled into the glass. Null drank, put bottle and glass on the desk, and looked at the heavy iron safe that stood in the corner of the room. The door of the safe stood open a crack.

Null took two swift steps and reached the strong-box. The door swung open and his hands went into the interior. He worked feverishly. Papers came out of the safe and were dropped on the floor. Then the groping hands brought out small canvas sacks, heavy with their contents. Null thrust the sacks into his pockets and stood up. His coat sagged with the burden.

He wet his lips nervously. The

strength that had filled his face was gone, and only cunning remained. He stood looking at the gutted safe, then swiftly he slammed the door shut, turned, and blowing out the light on the desk, hurried out of the office.

Across the hall he went and up the stairs. A corridor led him to his own room. There, by lamplight, he pulled a telescope grip from beneath the bed to thrust clothing into it.

Kent Hull had reverted to type.

CHAPTER XX

Posse Bait

THE shack for which Mat McCarthy headed was four miles from Ladron. It was a little adobe building, unused and dilapidated. But Bill Westfall had shown it to McCarthy, and McCarthy, canny in the submerged ways of his business, had decided that it might be a good place to have handy. Accordingly he had instructed Westfall to put a stock of jerky in the place, added coffee to that stock, and left a filled lantern with the food. Mat McCarthy told Llano this as they rode through the rain.

"You never know," said McCarthy wisely, "when yo're goin' to need a cache an' hideout, leastwise in my line of business. I just had Bill fix it up."

Llano, preoccupied with his own thoughts, made no answer. McCarthy grunted and asked a question. "What you got in mind for that jasper we picked up?"

"I don't know, Mat," answered Llano frankly. "I sure don't know." A pause, then, "He's been under my feet ever since I hit Ladron. I want some talk out of him."

"You kind of like him, too," surmised McCarthy shrewdly. "Don't you?"

"Damn it, yes," answered Llano.

They splashed across a little stream running in low ground, climbed a hill, and McCarthy spoke to Hamarick, "About there, Shorty?"

Hamarick's voice, muffled by the rain, answered, "Just about. I'll ride ahead." His horse moved and McCarthy checked the gait of his party while the scout reconnoitered.

There was no report from Hamarick, so after a short wait McCarthy swung to the right. Within five minutes the shack was a black blob in the darkness ahead. As they halted, the lantern glowed, and Hamarick appeared in the doorway.

"Come on in out of the rain, you fellows," he invited with a grin.

The men dismounted. McCarthy unlashed Fallien from the pack horse and the animals were tied to the post of a fence which still stood close to the shack, the wire tripped from the posts.

Inside the shack, Virge Savoy lowered Fallien to the dirt floor. The tall man was beginning to regain consciousness, stirring and moaning softly.

"You slugged him quite a jolt," said Llano critically.

"It wasn't no time for love taps," answered McCarthy.

The men were wet. McCarthy still wore a poncho raided from a trooper. Virge Savoy was also covered by a raincoat, but the others were soaked to the skin. They made light of their wetness. McCarthy produced dry papers and tobacco and smokes went around. There was exhilaration in the shack, a surge of good feeling. These men had done a task, a dangerous task, and had come through in good style. Llano, glancing at the faces about him, grinned a little. Here was a hardy crew.

"You look," he said, "like taking me out of jail was just picking daisies."

"It wasn't much harder," McCarthy grinned. "Westfall came ridin' in to the Junta like I said. We caught our horses an' lit a shuck for town. When we got to Ladron, we went to the hotel. Nathan showed us yore room an' we took what we could find there. Shorty put Nathan's shirt-tail in his mouth to keep him from talkin' too much, an' we locked him in.

"Then we went to the barn. The barn boy climbed into the hayloft and we barred him up there with a piece of two-by-four. We didn't figure that you'd want to go back for yore horses an' such. Then Bill went to Mulligan's, an' the rest of us sneaked around back of the jail. There were a lot of men movin' around, an' we weren't noticed much."

"It was mighty fine of you to take so much trouble about my junk," Llano smiled. "I take it kindly, Mat."

DON'T you mention it," McCarthy grinned. "Bill an' Mulligan staged a sham battle down at the edge of town, yellin' an' shootin'. We took care of the soldiers as they came to hand. They sure do wear nice ponchos, them soldiers." McCarthy shook the poncho he was wearing. "Keep a man good an' dry," he concluded.

"How'd you get into the jail?" Llano was curious.

McCarthy's grin broadened. "Why, after we'd sort of argued with a soldier down the street an' got his coat an' hat, it wasn't no trouble to speak of. I run up to the jail an' yelled, an' they come out an' I started around the corner. They come right along like they was halter broke, an' Virge an' Arch an' Shorty was there to greet 'em."

"Did you have to—" began Llano.

"Naw," McCarthy forestalled the question. "We just tapped 'em an' let

'em lay till you was out. Then we packed 'em in. We wouldn't of cared if somebody'd seen us then. We kind of owe Ladron a jolt or two an' that would of been a good place to hand it out."

Llano nodded. "It was slick, Mat."

"Slick enough," acknowledged McCarthy. "Everything went smooth except havin' that jasper in yore cell. Why did you bring him along, Llano?"

"Because," answered Llano, "he stuck a gun in my back when the soldiers came for me this morning, and I'm curious about it."

"The dirty skunk," swore Hamarick. "Why don't you—"

"He's not a skunk yet," interrupted Llano. "He might have had a reason. He's a U.S. marshal, you see."

There was concern written on the faces about the lantern. Llano, stooping over, opened Fallien's coat, and the gold badge winked in the light. "You couldn't blame him," he said. "Besides, when he was in my cell I got an idea he was trying to help me out."

Fallien blinked his eyes and opened them.

"Has anybody got a drink?" asked Llano.

Hamarick had a flask in a saddle pocket. He went out to get it, and Virge Savoy, stooping, lifted Fallien to a sitting position. Fallien's head rolled limply.

"I hit him pretty hard," said Mat McCarthy, eyeing the tall man.

Hamarick came back with the liquor and Fallien was given a drink. The raw whiskey burned his throat but strengthened him. He held his head erect.

"Now what?" asked McCarthy.

"Wait awhile until he feels better," answered Llano. "Then I'll talk to him. What do you plan, Mat?"

"To get to hell out of here," an-

nounced McCarthy. "We got to wait for Boill an' then we'll haul our freight. I ain't lost a thing here, not a thing."

Llano shook his head. "I've got some unfinished business," he said. "I'd like to go with you, Mat, but I'd better attend to that."

Hamarick swore, disbelief in his voice. "You goin' to stick around here?" he demanded. "They'll hang you so high you won't never come down."

"Maybe," Llano answered noncommittally.

Fallien's voice sounded then, interrupting them. They turned and looked at him.

"You came here looking for a man?" Dale Fallien rasped.

"So you can talk, now!" snapped Llano. "Yeah, I came here looking for a man. A friend of mine named Ames brought seven thoroughbred horses here, and he was killed in Ladron. His mother asked me to look him up."

"I wondered," said Fallien. His voice already was much stronger. "I saw you come into Ladron canyon. You came from McCarthy's hideout. I wondered if you were in business with him."

Llano's gray eyes glinted their admiration. Here was Dale Fallien in desperate circumstances and he had the nerve to ask a question.

"Mat," explained Llano desperately, "used to punch cows with Jack Ames and me. Mat was kind enough to help me look for Jack. Was there anything else you wanted to know?"

Fallien shrugged, and Llano, taking the initiative, asked a question in turn. "Ever since I came here you've been under my feet," he said. "Why, Fallien?"

"You're a trouble-maker," answered Fallien bluntly. "It was part of my business to watch you an' I wondered

if you were goin' to work for the Duro Grant."

"And you found out." Llano grated the words. "Now another thing—This morning you stuck a gun in my back when Adell and those others came for me. Why was that?"

"You was set to make a fight. They'd of shot you to ribbons."

"Nice of you," commented Llano ironically. "You save me from gettin' shot up so that the anti-Grant boys would lynch me. Mighty thoughtful."

"I didn't think about that at the time," Fallien admitted.

"But you thought of it later," said Llano. "What would you do if you were me, Fallien?"

Fallien did not answer for a moment, then he grinned painfully.

"My head hurts," he drawled, "an' likely I ain't thinkin' straight, but if I was you, I'd turn me loose."

"So you could stick another gun in my back?"

"So I could prove that you didn't kill Paul Gunther."

The words almost set Llano back on his heels. There was incredulity on his face and he looked at Fallien. "I know I didn't kill Gunther," he blurted, "but how do you know it?"

"The man that killed Gunther smoked marijuana," drawled Dale Fallien calmly. "I just found out today."

"How?" The question came from Mat and Llano simultaneously.

Fallien seemed to enjoy the moment. "I picked up a tobacco sack when I picked up Gunther," he answered. "The tobacco had marijuana mixed with it. You don't smoke marijuana."

"I don't," agreed Llano, "but—"

"Let it go at that," rasped Fallien. "I'm an officer. I can do you some good. What do you say, Land?"

"I'm damned if I know," answered Llano.

Fallien's face was gray. "My head hurts like hell," he said. "You think it over. Could I have another drink of liquor?"

Shorty Hamarick tendered the bottle and Fallien drank. Llano and Mat McCarthy drew aside "I'd like to let him go, Llano," counseled McCarthy.

"I never meant to keep him," grunted Llano. "What will I do, Mat?"

"Damned if I know." McCarthy scratched his head. "We got some time to wait. Bill ain't come yet. Think it over. One thing sure, yo're crazy if you go back to Ladron."

Llano held out his hand. "Give me a smoke," he requested. "Damn it, Mat—"

McCarthy proffered tobacco and papers.

"That fellow's been around," announced McCarthy admiringly. "He knows how to play a hand."

SHORTY HAMARICK was moving around the shack. From a shelf, hung by wires from a beam overhead, he produced jerky and a sack of coffee. "Stir up a fire, Virge," he commanded. "I'm ga'nt. I could use a bait before we pulled out."

Virge Savoy moved to the little dilapidated fireplace. Arch Savoy stirred nervously.

"I wonder what's keepin' Bill," he said petulantly. "Mebbe I'd better go see."

McCarthy stepped away from Llano. "You'll stay here," he contradicted. "Bill will be along. Nobody is goin' to pull out an' hang us up waitin' for him when Bill gets here."

"Do you reckon that Bill would go to Cameron now?" Virge Savoy asked.

"Not Bill!" snapped Arch Savoy. "Bill's all right!"

Fallien's eyes had opened swiftly as Virge Savoy spoke. He looked at the

big, blond twin. His lips opened as if he were about to speak.

Llano Land, against the wall, pulled his watch from the fob pocket of his sodden trousers. The watch guard caught on the butt of the big Colt and hung there. Llano freed it. The hands of the watch were together at twelve o'clock. It was midnight.

Restoring the watch to its place, Llano moved over and stood before Fallien.

"You can come and go, Fallien," he said slowly. "That is, if it's all right with Mat and his boys."

"It's all right with me," agreed Mat. "But he's got to stay put till we get away from here."

"Of course—" began Llano.

There was the sound, muffled but steady, of a horse outside the shack—the clop, clop, clop of shod feet on wet ground. McCarthy moved swiftly to the door. Hamarick, with a single movement, reached the lantern and stood ready to extinguish it. Virge and Arch Savoy were alert.

McCarthy opened the door. From outside came a voice carrying through the drip of the rain.

"It's me, Bill!"

McCarthy relaxed and Hamarick, stepping away from the lantern, lifted the boiling coffee bucket from the fire.

Bill Westfall came into the shack. Rain glistened on his yellow saddle slicker. Rain dripped from his hat brim, and a drop hung, suspended, on the end of his long, sharp nose. Bill spoke straight at Mat McCarthy.

"There's hell to pay in Ladron," he said. "Rose Jeull has been killed an' they're saying Llano did it!"

"My God!" roared McCarthy.

Westfall went on, speaking rapidly. "I was with Mulligan," he continued. "We'd gone to the edge of town an' shot some and yelled, and then started

runnin' around like we was lookin' for the men that had started things. We got by all right. We got away before the soldiers come lookin' to see what had happened, an we went Mulligan's place. We waited there. I wanted to make sure that there wasn't any kick-backs before I came on out here."

Llano stepped back a pace. Westfall turned to McCarthy.

"I tell you, we got to go," he urged. "We got to get out of here an' a long ways off. If they find us, if we got Land with us, it's just Katy bar the door. We'll be done."

"To hell with that!" snapped McCarthy. "Damn 'em! They can get a belly full with us."

"Don't be a fool, Mat," Virge Savoy put in. "You know—"

Dale Fallien spoke from beside the wall. "Rose Juell talked to me before I went to see you, Land," he rasped.

Land turned and looked down at the tall man. "What did she tell you?"

"That you didn't kill Gunther." Fallien paused, went on, "But that Flaco an' Huerta did."

Llano turned back to McCarthy. "I'm not goin' with you, Mat," he said. "You'll hit some of these riders. You can't hardly miss 'em. Westfall's right. If I'm with you, it will be tough."

"An' I said to hell with that!" roared McCarthy. "I said—"

"We stand here an' talk like a bunch of fools, an' those fellows are ridin'," Westfall interrupted. "For the Lord's sake, Mat, let's do somethin'!"

McCarthy calmed. "We'll drink a cup of coffee an' eat that jerky," he said, the leader once more. "Then we'll go, all of us. Llano, you'll go with us an' it'll just be too damn' bad if we meet anybody. Pass the bucket around, Shorty, an' you fellows grab a handful of jerky."

Shorty picked up the coffee bucket by the bail. He poured from it into a tin can, lifted the can to his lips, and swore when his lips were burned. The two Savoyes had reached out and thrust big hands into the sack of jerky. Hamarick put down the bucket and shifted the can quickly from hand to hand.

"Too hot!" he protested. "I can't—"

"Let it go then!" snapped McCarthy. "Llano—"

Llano Land was gone. He had stepped away and out of the open door. As an answer to McCarthy's words, there came the sound of a horse running.

"Llano!" roared McCarthy, springing to the door. "Llano!"

It was no use. McCarthy turned to face his men. "Come on," he ordered. "Llano Land has gone back to Ladron. I know it. We got to—"

"I'm not goin'," snarled Westfall. "I'll run my head into a loop for no man."

McCarthy turned. He looked at the Savoyes. He looked at Shorty Hamarick. On their faces was written the same hard determination that shone on Westfall's countenance. McCarthy slumped.

"We'll go," said Westfall, "but we'll go the other way."

"Wait a minute," Fallien's voice rasped. The men in the adobe shack turned to look at the tall man.

Fallien struggled up from beside the wall. He stood rocking on his feet, but despite his apparent weakness there was a recognizable force in the man. McCarthy's men hesitated.

"You said awhile ago that you moved the cornerstone for the Grant," Fallien said to Virge Savoy.

"An' what of it?" snapped the man.

"Just this." Fallien's words were measured. "I'm a deputy United

States marshal but right now I'm borrowed from the marshal's office by the Duro Grant, an' if what you say is so, I've found it."

"An' what's that to us?" snarled Westfall. "We—"

"Do you want to help Llano Land?" asked Fallien. "Do you want a shot at the Duro Grant?"

"Hell, yes!" McCarthy's voice was eager.

"Then listen to me!" ordered Fallien. "Listen, an' I'll tell you how."

CHAPTER XXI

Guns at Ladron House

LLANO LAND rode south. He had listened while McCarthy and his men argued in the shack but he knew that the argument was futile. McCarthy would never be able to hold his men to him, and Llano did not want Mat to try. So, while Shorty Hamarick passed his can of hot coffee from one hand to the other, and while McCarthy blustered, Llano had stepped out into the rain and found his horse.

Fallien had said that Flaco and Huerta had killed Paul Gunther. Llano knew that the tall man had not lied. He knew, too, that Cameron had ordered that killing. Cameron had been the cause of Jose Juell's death. The man, Llano decided, had done too many things. He had lived too long.

The sky was barely graying in the east when he reached Ladron House.

There were words exchanged in the darkness ahead. Evidently the sentry's corporal had come to find the cause of the disturbance. Llano felt steps against his knees. He found them with his feet and went up, his hand encountering a door. The corporal said, "Who's horse is this?" and Llano turned the doorknob softly. The door

opened, and Llano was out of the rain and in velvet blackness.

With hand extended, groping before him, Llano moved ahead. The hand found a chair. He circled it. The hand struck the corner of a desk. Thick carpet muffled his movement as he went around the desk. His outstretched fingers rested against a wall, and he groped along it until he came upon a door. That door also opened noiselessly.

Now he was in dim light, a corridor stretching before him. There were heavy portières at the end of the corridor. Llano went along it, reached portières, and pushing them aside saw the great hall of Ladron House.

He waited there at the portières, letting his eyes become accustomed to the light. A fire blazed in the fireplace at then end of the room, but Llano could see no one in the room. Now, ready, he moved forward.

As he moved, a woman arose from a chair beside the fire and turned toward him. Gwynne Rae. . .

Llano was well into the room now, facing the fireplace, his back toward the front door of the house. He stepped forward, three long paces, and stopped. Gwynne Rae was moving toward him. The fireplace caught the dull gleam of the polished floor, the sheen of silver in the candelabra, and winked from polished brass of andirons.

"You . . ." said Gwynne Rae, hesitantly.

"I'm Llano Land," he said, his voice a harsh croak. "I've come for Cameron."

The girl was before him now. She stood, looking up into his face, her eyes questioning. Then as she caught the expression of Llano's face, fright supplanted the question.

"For Cameron?" she asked.

"For Cameron and for Null," grated Llano.

"Why do you want them?" she asked him.

Llano did not answer that. "You'd better go," he said hoarsely. "I'm going to see Cameron and Null."

Gwynne drew herself erect. "You tell me to go from my own house?" she demanded incredulously.

"It won't be pretty!" warned Llano. "Where are they?"

"You've come to kill them." Gwynne's voice was steady. "They aren't here."

"They need killing." Llano spoke evenly now, some of the hoarseness gone.

"Why?" Gwynne was insistent. It seemed to a detached part of Llano's brain that the girl was sitting in judgment. Upon what he did not know.

"I can tell you," he answered, speaking to that judge in the girl. "They've done things no man ought to do and be let live. They've stolen. They've set murder loose. It's time they quit!"

"How do you know?" Gwynne stood before Llano, blocking his movement.

"How do I know?" There was bitterness in Llano's tone. "It's plain on the face of it. Paul Gunther was killed because he talked too much and turned men against the Grant. Will Loman was killed. He'd squatted on land that the Grant claimed. His wife died because the Grant kept her from having a place to stop and rest. And now Rose Juell— But why do I stand here telling you this? You know it! Where are Cameron and Null?"

Gwynne Rae turned and walked back toward the fire. Llano followed her, not of his own volition but as though he were being led at the end

of some invisible chain. Before the fireplace the girl stopped, turning to face him again.

"Rose Juell," murmured Gwynne softly. "I was with her when she died."

"You?" The word was jerked from Llano.

"I was with her," Gwynne repeated. "I'd gone to the house because— It doesn't matter why I'd gone to the house. It was black and dark." Gwynne's voice was low and strained, the words coming with an effort. "She lay there by the door, and she was dying."

Llano leaned forward as Gwynne stopped. His weariness and his wet, tired body were forgotten. For a moment he lived again with Gwynne Rae as his eyes. He could see this woman, this great lady, before the door of that dark, forbidding house. Could almost see her entering its blackness.

"She left a message for you with me," Gwynne said softly. "I'll give it to you. She said, 'Tell Llano that Flaco killed Ames.'"

"Flaco?" Llano rasped. "Flaco?"

Gwynne Rae did not heed the interruption. Her voice went on, even, expressionless, mechanical. The girl was back in Paul Gunther's house and her eyes were wide with what she saw there.

"Then she lifted her head," said Gwynne Rae, "and she said, 'I love you, Llano,' and she died."

FLAT silence in the great hall of Ladron House. The fire snapped and the gleams from the silver were cat's eyes in the dusk. Outside, the rain fell in a thinning drizzle. Llano's head was lowered.

"I think she was good," added Gwynne Rae, slowly. "She was good and she loved you, Llano Land."

A latch clicked and there was a draft in the hall but neither of the two before the fire noticed. Llano stood unmoving, and Gwynne Rae was watching him intently. There were soft steps and then Arthur Cameron spoke harshly.

"Stand still, Land! Gwynne, step away!"

That sharp command brought Llano to himself. He knew instantly that the man behind him had him covered. He knew that this was the end of things. He stood still. Gwynne Rae made a little, soft hurt sound, but did not move.

Cameron spoke again. "Stand away, Gwynne!"

Llano began to turn. He moved slowly, holding his body rigid and his hands down against his sides. Gwynne Rae was against a chair beside the fireplace and the light of the fire was red on Cameron's face.

"So you came here?" purred Cameron. "You came here."

Llano faced the man. "I'm here," he said simply.

"That is fortunate." Cameron did not move. He held a gun raised and pointed squarely at Llano's chest. His hand did not shake, and there was wild, vindictive triumph on his dark face. "Fortunate, Land. You'll die here!"

"Arthur—" began Gwynne pleadingly. "Arthur—"

"Be still, girl!" ordered Cameron.

Llano watched the man. He felt the big army Colt at his waistband and held himself ready. This was the last card in the box, the last roll of the wheel. This was the pay-off! Cameron would shoot, but before he did, there would be a warning. There would be a contraction of muscles in that scowling face before the finger stirred on the trigger. There would be time,

there had to be time, for one shot from the army Colt. . . .

The fire caught at a pine knot and shot up, leaping toward the blackened chimney. Light came from that sudden burst of fire. There was a little movement, a sound to the right. Cameron tensed and Gwynne Rae said, her voice a tiny thing in the great room, "Kent. . . ."

Cameron took a swift step to his right. His eyes flashed from Llano toward the stair. Llano, too, turned his head. Kent Null stood on the stairs. There was a weight in Null's hand, and his face was ashen.

"Null," rasped Cameron. "Come here, Null!"

Very slowly, Kent Null came down the stairs. As he moved, Cameron backed further so that he could see both Llano and the man on the steps. At the bottom of the stairs, Null stopped. He carried a telescope grip that bulged in its straps and his coat sagged. From one pocket protruded the top of a small canvas sack.

"So . . ." said Cameron harshly.

"I am leaving, Arthur." Null's voice was uncertain. "I—"

The gun that Cameron held so steadily on Llano shifted suddenly. "Leaving?" Cameron rasped the word. "Damn you!"

Under the menace of the gun and voice, Null broke. He dropped the grip he held. His hands snatched wildly at his pockets, and heavy metal, protected by canvas, thumped on the floor.

"Arthur!" beseeched Kent Null, "Arthur!"

He seemed to shrivel as he screamed the words. Cameron's gun was leveled. Llano Land's own hand moved and the Colt came from his waistband.

The gun in Cameron's hand roared heavily. Kent Null, his scream broken,

pitched down to sprawl across the gold he had dropped.

Cameron wheeled, weapon still raised—and Llano Land, stepping forward, spaced two even shots. Cameron's coat seemed to move as invisible fingers tugged at it. His raised hand lowered slowly, and the weapon dropped from his relaxing fingers. Cameron stood a moment, poised, and then full length, his joints rigid, pitched down upon his face.

Gwynne Rae, beside the chair, caught at her mouth with one hand. Her eyes, searching Llano's face, saw the triumph there, saw the blaze of light in his eyes, saw the man that had hidden behind an immobile mask. For a moment, the girl stood, trembling, and then she collapsed, falling into the chair.

At that movement, Llano turned, gun in hand. He saw Gwynne in the chair, and stepped toward her.

Then there was confusion at the door. It swung open. A soldier burst through, other men behind him—Wayne Metcalf and Sergeant Cassidy and others. Llano wheeled from the girl and running, made for the portières. They swung behind him. A door was flung open. Another door banged under his hands. The rain beat into his face, and from his right a man shouted and a rifle cracked. Mud splashing as he ran, Llano flung himself away from Ladron House.

In the hall of Ladron House, Wayne Metcalf gathered Gwynne Rae into his arms and stood up. The girl was limp, lifeless. Cassidy, straightening up from beside Arthur Cameron, strode across to Null and moved the lawyer. There were men, soldiers, night-clothing and pallid faces of clustered about, and on the stair the servants showed. Metcalf looked at Cassidy and Cassidy shook his head.

"They're dead, sorr," said Cassidy.

Carrying Gwynne, Metcalf moved toward the stairs. A woman detaching herself from the group there came toward him—Elisa, Gwynne Rae's maid. Poised at the bottom of the stairs, Metcalf gave orders.

"Search the town, Sergeant!" he commanded. "That was Llano Land!"

CHAPTER XXII

Payoff

OUT in the rain, Llano Land moved from shadow to dark shadow. Already the light was growing in the east. There was yet a task to do before daylight was upon him. Llano knew that he had not much time. He knew that he was hunted, would be searched for. Before he was found, he had a duty to perform. Beside the corner of a building he stopped and considered. Where might he find Flaco?

The Exchange Saloon was most likely. Llano knew that he must gamble on his first choice. And he must reach the Exchange without being seen.

He moved forward, peered around the corner of the adobe and then, swiftly, ran across the street.

His crossing made in safety, he went on until he came to an alley, turned to his left and followed down through the mud and the refuse that was there. Again he crossed a street, flitting through the darkness. Then he went on.

Presently he paused. There was a building to his left. Cautiously, Llano tried the door. It was unlocked. He stepped in.

The odor of stale beer and of whisky assailed his nostrils. He worked his way cautiously across the room

The weapon dropped
from Cameron's relaxing
fingers. . . .



he had entered, paused, and with his ear against a door, listened.

In the barroom of the Exchange a weary bartender watched behind the bar. There was a little group at one end of the bar, not drinking, but waiting. Pat Greybull was in that group, and red-headed Frazier and others, miners and ranchers. Further up the bar Dick Wadell, neck bandaged where Mulligan's razor had slashed it, stood and talked with two or three men, Grant adherents. And in a booth Flaco and Huerta sat drinking, drinking steadily.

"We'll go in the mornin'," said Frazier to Greybull. "I think the Grant people let him out of jail. They wanted the boys to get out of town followin' him. He killed that girl, all right, no mistake about that, but their scheme didn't work. There's still plenty here to make the Grant walk a chalk-line."

"But the cavalry," expostulated

Greybull for the twentieth time. "What about—"

Frazier snorted. "The cavalry will keep law an' order!" he snapped. "But the way we'll work it—"

Frazier broke off. Horses were coming along the street at a full gallop.

"Some of the boys got tired an' come back," said a bearded man by Frazier's elbow. "Had 'em a wild goose chase in the rain."

Frazier nodded. Flaco called from the booth, "Baldy! Bring another bottle."

Beyond the booth, at the back of the room, a door opened and a man stepped through. He was hatless, wet, and his shoulders sagged. He moved steadily, as a man with a purpose. Frazier, turning, saw the man. Dick Wadell saw him, and recoiled against the bar.

Llano Land walked unwaveringly past two empty booths, and stopping,

looked into the little enclosure where sat Flaco and Huerta.

"Flaco!" he said.

Wadell was reaching for his gun. Frazier had started forward. Greybull was turning. There were steps on the walk outside the Exchange. Steps crossing the tin canopied porch. The bartender, with a yell, went down behind the bar.

Then came the shots. Three of them, roaring in the room, beating out of the booth, reverberating between the walls. A squealing followed the shots, a high-pitched, shrill sound such as a stuck hog makes in a slaughter-house.

Llano Land, legs spread wide, braced against the blow that had struck him, peering through the smoke that came from his gun. Deliberately he lifted the gun and fired again till the squealing ceased.

"It's Land!" yelled Frazier. "It—" He started forward.

Wadell, his gun out, lifted it to fire. Llano Land took a step and clung to the wall of the booth for support.

Then, through the doorway of the Exchange Saloon stepped a tall, stern-faced man with a gun in his hand and his hat set over a rag that was bound about his gray head. There was a gold badge on the man's wet coat.

"Stop!" the tall man rasped. "Stop right there!"

Behind the tall man others crowded in. A fat man who wore an army Poncho, and a campaign hat that was too small and that sat rakishly upon his head; two tall blond men who were surprisingly alike; a small wiry fellow; and a man with a long sharp nose and sharp eyes. These held weapons.

Frazier, confronting the tall man, tapped out a question. "Who are you?"

Dale Fallien answered, his voice an

even drawl. "I'm a deputy United States marshal. These are my men. We'll take charge here."

THE army surgeon said that Llano Land would not live a day. He might, the doctor intimated, live a trifle longer than that if he, Doctor von Weigand, operated. On the other hand, operations on abdominal wounds were not as a general rule successful.

"Gra'maw Stamps," said Bill, "can take a ghost an' bring him back to life. I'm goin' to get her."

When Wadell had been taken to the jail under guard, Fallien had Metcalf consulted further and then called upon Donald Rae. Rae, despite his shoulder wound, accompanied the two officers to Cameron's office, and there they delved into the papers that were still in the safe and those that Kent Null had scattered on the floor.

While they worked they were joined by Gwynne Rae.

"I don't know what must be done," she said, "but I do know that the Grant must repay everything that it has taken."

It was not until late in the afternoon that Greybull, a few representative miners from Marthastown and the adjoining district, Park Frazier and one or two of the men who had fought against the Grant, were called in. When they had assembled in the little office. Fallien told them they were safe once again from fire, gunsmoke, and blood.

And so they left, sure for the first time in months that they would wake up in the morning with their houses intact and their stock untouched.

As for Llano Land, gra'maw took one look at him and said:

"Can't keep a man like Llano down. He'll be up in no time, good as new!"



The Apaches rode out
and raided Jesus Cota's
ranch. . . .

HELL RIM RANGE

By Harry Van Demark

*More dead than alive, they thundered where the
devil himself feared to ride — and no man ever
came back!*

WITH the possible exception of Chief Crazy Horse of the Sioux, Chief Victorio of the Apaches was the greatest of all Indian generals. Army men in the Southwest during the latter 1870's were almost unanimous in the opinion that this untutored old Indian displayed astonishing military genius.

And they were determined that peace on the Texas-Mexican border depended to a large extent on the extermination of Victorio and his venturesome band.

During the winter of 1879-80 Victorio disappeared into the wilds of Mexico under pressure by the Texas Rangers, cooperating with the Mex-

ican authorities. With the old trouble-maker thus out of their jurisdiction, the rangers returned to their adobe quarters at Ysleta, near El Paso. But Victorio had been one of their chief worries for some time and still foremost in every ranger's mind was the determination to "get" him.

With water and green grass plentiful after the summer rains in 1880, the old marauder was soon at it again. He turned up at Lake Guzman in Old Mexico, then headed eastward toward Borrracho Pass near the Rio Grande.

Soon ranger headquarters heard that the old chiefs was making for the Eagle Mountains in Texas. This report was confirmed when the Mexican government notified General Grierson, commandant at Fort Davis, Texas, who dispatched a courier to Lieutenant George W. Baylor of the rangers, asking his cooperation in exterminating Victorio and his raiders.

At the same time General Grierson ordered his cavalry to Eagle Springs. Lieutenant Baylor led a detachment of thirteen rangers to join the expedition. This detachment headed for old Fort Quitman, eighty miles below El Paso, from where Lieutenant Baylor reported to General Grierson by telegraph.

The message did not reach its destination. Victorio's men had cut the telegraph wires. The line was repaired and the rangers were advised to join the United States troops near Eagle Springs, keeping a sharp lookout for Indian trails along the way.

No Indian signs were discovered, however, until the rangers reached Eighteen-Mile Water Hole, where some time previously Grierson's men had had a skirmish with Victorio's band.

After leaving the water hole, the rangers found where the Apaches had torn down the telegraph wire, carried off a long piece of it, and destroyed the insulators. Telegraph poles had been dragged for miles and left along the trail. Apparently the Indians had about 200 animals and the trail pointed toward the Carrizo Mountains.

The rangers caught up with the army forces at Rattlesnake Springs where they had established a camp. Two companies of cavalry had been assigned the duty of finding and wiping out Victorio.

Rangers and soldiers were quickly on the move again. Victorio's trail led southwest toward Apache Tanks. Leaving camp at dusk, the trailers rode all night, came upon the Apache trail at the stage road the next morning. Signs indicated that the redmen had gone toward Fort Quitman, an abandoned frontier post where there was a stage station.

On August 9, 1880, the stage, with driver Ed Walde at the reins, started for El Paso. General John H. Byrnes, a retired army officer, and the only passenger, occupied the rear seat of the coach. The light stage, drawn by two fast little Spanish mules, rolled down the valley and entered a canyon—a box-like pass, with high walls on either side. A lonely spot, just made to order for an ambush.

Walde had proceeded about halfway through the pass, when he swung around a short bend in the road and came upon old Victorio and a hundred of his warriors. The Indian advance guard fired a volley, mortally wounding General Byrnes.

Unheeding a shower of bullets, Walde turned his mules, gave them free rein and made a quick dash back

to the stage station. Victorio's warriors chased the stage for four or five miles, but the wiry little mules outran the Indian ponies to the sheltering walls of the adobe station. Astounded onlookers were shocked to see General Byrnes' body hanging partly out of the stage.

Miraculously, Wade escaped without a scratch. The mules, too, were unharmed. But the little canvas top of the stage was literally shot to pieces. Three wheel spokes had been shot out and there were at least twenty bullet marks on and through the body of the vehicle.

Lieutenant Baylor and his rangers buried General Byrnes near Fort Quitman, erected a crude headstone and fired a volley over the grave.

Their lust for blood thoroughly aroused by this action, the Apaches raided Jesus Cota's ranch, killed his herder and drove off one hundred and fifty head of cattle, heading for a ford on the Rio Grande to cross back into Mexico. In fording the river some forty head of the cattle mired in the quicksands. Whereupon the Apaches, in a heartless gesture, cut chunks of flesh out of their living bodies.

Again Victorio and his raiders found temporary safety in Mexico. At that time American troops and rangers were not permitted to go south of the border in pursuit of the marauding redmen, except on special invitation from the Mexican authorities, though negotiations to permit such pursuit had long been pending between the two governments.

As a single unit Lieutenant Baylor's rangers were no match in numbers for Victorio and his warriors, so the lieutenant ordered a return to Yaleta.

As between Americans and Mexicans Victorio showed no favors. He continued his bloodthirsty sorties in Mexico and Don Ramon Arrandas, captain of the Mexican volunteers, finally sent a special invitation to Lieutenant Baylor to cross the river and aid in the extermination of the Apaches.

Late in September, 1880, Baylor arrived at the Arrandas Ranch with thirteen of his men. There, they joined Mexican volunteers from nearby towns on both sides of the border. The combined forces totaled over one hundred men.

On the night of September 19 they crossed an Indian trail south of the Rancheria Mountains. But because of the darkness, and the fact that the ground had been soaked by recent rains, they were unable to estimate the size of the war party. Later the same night they saw Indian signal fires.

The following morning, with an advance detail of five rangers and ten Mexican volunteers, Ranger Sergeant James B. Gillett scouted in the direction of the fires. His instructions were to take and hold the Rancheria Mountains before old Victorio and his warriors reached them.

When the main body of rangers and volunteers came up, Gillett reported that he had learned at Lucero, a stage stop, that the Apaches were near Carrizal. The rangers, with seventy-three volunteers, made a forced night march to that town, but found that the Indians had fled.

Again heavy rains obliterated most of the trail. They picked it up later, however, and followed it until dark, gathering up a few loose horses that the Apaches had stolen and released in their flight.



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ALL-STORY WESTERN

The little Ranger-Mexican army then returned to Candelario, where they learned that Victorio and his entire band had been seen crossing the Chihuahu stage road. They marched back to San Jose and went into camp to await the arrival of the Mexican commander in charge of that district, General Joaquin Terrasas.

General Terrasas arrived on October 3 with two hundred cavalry and one hundred infantry.

The combined outfits set out for Reboadero Springs, on the new Chihuahua stage road. After a two-day rest they marched forty miles to Borracho Pass, where the Indians had camped after killing General Byrnes. Twenty miles west of the pass they crossed the Apache trail. All units were ordered into battle formation. No Indians were encountered, however, and they camped in the pass to await supplies.

At Borracho they were joined by Lieutenant A. H. Shaffer, with one company of the Tenth United States Cavalry, Lieutenant Manney and Captain Parker with seventy-five Apache scouts. These Apaches were a wild band, enemies of Victorio, yet General Tarrasas viewed them with distrust.

Scouting units sent southwest to the Los Pinos Mountains learned that Victorio had turned down toward Chihuahua. General Terrasas called Captain Parker and Lieutenants Baylor, Shaffer and Manney into conference. The Apache Trail, he said, was leading them farther and farther away from the border. He thought it best for them to return to the States.

The morning after the Texas Rangers, the American troops and the Apache scouts had turned homeward, a courier brought General Terrasas

HELL RIM RANGE

the information that Victorio and his entire band of followers was camped at Tres Castillos, a small group of hills southwest of the Los Pinos range.

Terrasas immediately ordered his command to that point. Victorio's spies had reported the presence of the Mexican cavalry early in the day and had thereafter kept him informed of all enemy movements.

Victorio had just ordered his war chief, Nana, and fifty of his finest young warriors away on a raid. That left in his camp an even hundred braves, some of them very old men.

It was a fatal decision. Early in the morning Victorio mounted a white horse and undertook to make disposition of his remaining braves to meet the onslaught of enemy forces. The Mexicans discovered him and fired at him at long range. Two bullets pierced his body and he fell from his horse—dead.

The loss of their leader, and absence of Nana, second in command, so demoralized the Apaches that Terrasas and his men won an easy victory. Eighty-seven Indians were killed, and eighty-seven squaws with their children were captured.

The Mexican government showered many honors on General Terrasas — and the general was so elated over the outcome of the battle that he dispatched a courier to overtake Lieutenant Baylor and tell him the good news. Needless to say, the rangers were disappointed to learn that after being with Terrasas nearly a month, they had missed being in at the death of Victorio by less than two days.

But Baylor's efforts were not entirely without reward. Upon his return to camp at Ysleta, a commission as captain was awaiting him.

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ALL-STORY WESTERN

(Continued from Page 6)

hills with real stakes, were shooting their dust away on champagne for their particular lights-of-love.

No man had to leave that combination honky-tonk, no matter what sort of excitement he was seeking. Fun, fight or foot-race, or anything else—he would find it there in a welter of noise and tobacco smoke that could have been sliced with a knife.

Suddenly the door opened to admit a lone visitor out of the dark night into the din and glare. He was a tallish sort of a chap, somewhere in his middle thirties, slightly bewhiskered, but withal a little cleaner than most of the crowd.

In spite of the July heat—and it could get sizzling hot in those towns set down in the heart of the hills—he was wearing a fringed buckskin shirt, which marked him out from the rest of the herd. He checked his six-gun at the door and swaggered jauntily into the place.

"Hi, Johnnie! Come on and dance, Johnnie!" called the girls.

"That's Potato Creek Johnnie," a man at one of the tables told a stranger sitting with him. "The girls know that he never comes until he has panned out quite a pokeful of dust."

But Johnnie didn't happen to be girl-hungry that night. He was pleasant enough, grinning all over his homely face, as he pushed the girls aside and made his way to the bar. As events subsequently proved, the squire of Potato Creek had other things on his mind.

Johnnie at the bar got himself a hefty bumper of forty-rod liquor and went into executive session with a crony he found there. Evidently what Johnnie had to say tickled his friend just as thoroughly as it had the Potato

THE HOME CORRAL

Creek gold-panner. After a few more shots of red-eye they left the place, disappeared into the night, chuckling and slapping each other on the back.

And the next day was the Glorious Fourth! Deadwood always made a great occasion of the nation's birthday. There were twenty-one guns at sunrise, fired by placing big charges of black powder between two blacksmith's anvils, one on top of the other, with a fuse run in for ignition. And those anvil cannon made plenty of noise.

The Mayor of Deadwood led the parade, driving the only top buggy in town. Behind came the red-shirted members of the fire companies, cow-girls from Bell Fourche, and floats advertising the business houses, while those citizens not marching lined the street.

All this, though, was preliminary to the big event of the day. Already great cubes of solid granite had been set on the platform in the square in front of the Franklin House. At one o'clock pairs of brown miners, the best men in the hills with sledge and drill, were to mount the platform for the great drilling contest. The first prize was \$500.

There was hardly a man, woman or child who hadn't scrapped bottom to get the cash or dust to make a bet on one of the drilling teams. The winners would be the heroes for the day, the darlings of the dance-hall girls—at least until their prize money had been spent. Excitement always ran high before and during the contest.

But on this particular Fourth of July the contest failed to come off. And it was Potato Creek Johnnie's fault that it didn't. When Johnnie Perrett laid himself out on a big joke, it was bound to go over in a big way.

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ALL-STORY WESTERN

POTATO CREEK had hatched his plan when the Fourth of July committee announced far in advance that another exciting contest would precede the drilling exhibition. This was for the gold-panners, the men who roved the creeks, washing the gravel in their pans, gathering in a few flecks of gold dust from each pan, once in a while finding a nugget that ran into real money.

This contest was scheduled for eleven o'clock in the morning. The committee had secured ten piles of mixed sand and gravel from a stock brought in by the railroad. Into each pile they had mixed a full ounce—\$20 worth—of gold dust. The piles were neatly arranged along the creek than ran just off Main Street.

Ten creek miners had entered the contest, putting up their ounce of dust apiece. The one who washed closest to a full ounce of gold out his pile was to get the other contestants' dust, too, as well as a \$200 cash prize. Thus the winner would cash in close to \$400.

The contest was ready. Hundreds of people had crowded around to watch. The starting gun sounded and the panners started to wash their gravel in the waters of the creek. When all were finished the judges started weighing each man's gold.

Signs of excitement became evident on the judges' stand with the weighing of the first entry. Good reason! One ounce of gold had gone into that pile of sand—but nearly four ounces came out! The judges blinked, weighed the next. It tipped the scale just over three ounces. When they weighed the third pile of dust, the judges leaped from the stand and beat it out of town in a hurry.

Then began one of the most spectacular and at the same time least

THE HOME CORRAL

profitable gold rushes the Black Hills had ever known. The news of what had happened ran through the crowd like wildfire. That gravel was simply shot with gold!

No one stopped to figure that that sort of sand and gravel could never have the yellow metal in it. But gold is where you find it. Where did the stuff come from? Why from a bank about eight miles down the railroad. There was a whole mountain of the stuff waiting for anyone to get it.

The judges, having had the first knowledge, led the rush. Soon all the able-bodied men of Deadwood, including the Fourth of July committee and the champion drillers were following them. They went afoot and on horseback. One bunch, led by a railroad engineer, got up steam in a locomotive, piled on flat cars and whirled away down the line. Even the saloons and dance halls closed, so that barkeepers, gamblers and hangers-on could join in the rush.

Soon the town was practically empty save for the women and children. But hold! There were men around, too. At least the sound of raucous male laughter was resounding from in front of the Franklin House, where two disheveled hombres were rolling on the sidewalk in their glee.

Well, they should have got a good laugh out of the episode—this Potato Creek Johnnie Perret and his pal. They had spent enough on the joke. Johnnie and his partner had salted those ten piles of sand with something over \$700 worth of gold dust!

"It cost me all the dust I'd panned in two months, took the price of a hell of a good time around the dance halls," Johnnie afterwards related. "But I'll tell a man it was worth it to see every man in Deadwood scatter

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ALL-STORY WESTERN

and take to the hills like the devil was after 'em."

Some years later, when panning got really tough, Johnnie Perrett showed how little he thought of gold, as hard as he worked to get it. This was after Deadwood was old enough to become civic minded and had started the Adams Museum to preserve relics of its wild, free days.

This time, however, Johnnie Perrett came in from the hills with very little dust in his poke. But he did have a nugget the like of which mighty few of the old-timers, even, had ever seen. It weighed close to thirty ounces, or twice that much from some of the gold magnates who would want to place it on exhibit.

"Found it right up Old Potato Creek," Johnnie told the people of Deadwood "I was pannin' a bar that I'd been over a hundred times before without gettin' much of anything. Just goes to show that gold is where you find it."

"There's a powerful lot of gold in that nugget, Johnnie," said John Ostle, foreman of the Homestake. "You ought to get enough out of it to make that trip to Chicago you've been talkin' about these many years."

But Potato Creek Johnnie Perrett did not go to Chicago. He refused all offers for the nugget, presented it to the Adams Museum, where it can be seen today at Readwood.

When asked why he had given all that gold away, Johnnie grinned and said:

"It'll be a damn sight better monument for me than anything they've got up on Lookout Peak."

Lookout Peak was Deadwood's cemetery.

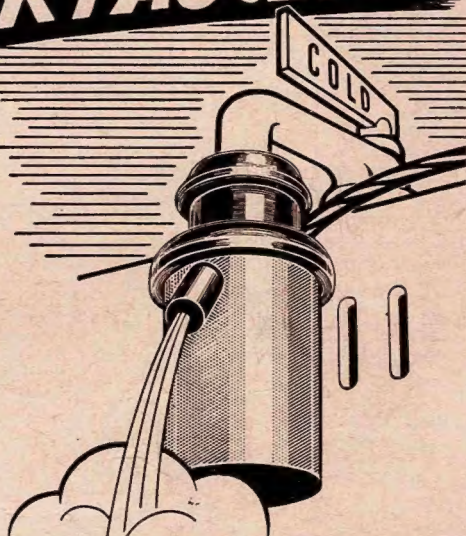
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